



STORM LORDS

BELOW THE SURFACE

MARIE HARTE



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Annotation

Water bends but doesn't break, and the River Prince must learn that weaknesses can become strengths with the right woman by his side.

The land of Tanselm will fall to evil if four identical princes wielding elemental powers fail to find their intended brides. Thrust into the parallel realm of earth to escape death and insure a future for their world, they have one mission and one mission only - to find their destined affai.

The River Prince, Marcus Storm, doesn't think he'll ever find a mate worthy of him in a world devoid of magic. To make matters worse, the evil that invades his own world has followed him into Seattle. Time is running out for Tanselm. He's working hard to find a woman to satisfy his need for a bride. But his well-earned conceit and sure charm don't work on Tessa Sheridan.

Tessa would be happy to put the sexily aggravating Marcus in his place. Unfortunately, she's dealing with a new and unwelcome form of telekinesis and an embezzler at work trying to frame her. She doesn't have time for Marcus's arrogance. But Marcus is all too willing to show her his passion runs deep, and his love is just there below the surface.

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Below the Surface
Storm Lords - 2
by
Marie Harte

Prologue

In one particular pocket of darkness between the planes of existence, sorcerer 'Sin Garu slid a pale, long-fingered hand through his hair and wondered, not for the first time, how he'd allowed one measly Storm Lord, the Prince of Fire, and his *affai* to escape.

The Storm Lords, four brothers, identical in appearance, similar in elemental magic with a smattering of psychic ability and not a one of them a match for his own dark magic. Yet here he sat, while Darius, Prince of Fire, fucked his bride like a rutting bull in the heavenly splendour of Tanselm.

'Sin Garu had been close to decimating the Storm Lord line for good, his effort to regain his rightful place as overking of Tanselm almost within reach. Yet instead of sitting atop the gilded throne in the heart of his homeland, he wasted his time in the shadows. *Always in the shadows.*

Instead of a council of Dark Lords, of elders and liaison rogues at his disposal, he had to make use of the reviled, the denigrated and most pathetic monsters of the dark. *My distinguished* Netharat *army*, he thought with bitter amusement.

Glancing over his shoulder at a quivering mass of bloodied wraith, he shook his head. "How foolish of me to trust you to get it right for once." He stared in disdain at Mirego, his once most-valued wraith, and waved a hand in the air while muttering a small spell under his breath. Burning Mirego to ash hadn't cured him of his rage, but revitalising the wraith to endure more torture was doing the trick.

The wraith's white eyes streaked with red, then putrid green. Its lumpy yellow skull turned both black and grey with bruises, and its waxy flesh was reduced to pits of skin covering hollows of pain and bloodied engorgement. Mirego tried to scream around the internal dark fire created by 'Sin Garu's sorcery, but couldn't. The sorcerer's unbridled power sapped the last fetid breath the wraith would ever give.

'Sin Garu gazed dispassionately at the rotting creature he'd spent so much time training and cursed Darius Storm and his chosen bride to everlasting torture in the black realms of hell.

"My lord?" a hesitant voice echoed.

"What?"

The wraith hobbled clumsily into the stone-walled room and bowed low, not meeting his gaze.

"My lord, the others are waiting for further instruction. The River Prince has had no apparent contact with Arim as of yet, and the woman is at it again, this time with fire."

‘Sin Garu’s mind filled with curiosity, dismissing Darius Storm and his bitch, Samantha. Instead his thoughts turned to brother number two—Marcus, the River Prince, and the odd woman who seemed to possess all manner of magic in an otherwise mundane world.

“Tell me her name again,” he ordered, pleased when the wraith kept his bow low, his eyes firmly trained on the ground.

“Tessa Sheridan. I’ve placed a scrying bowl on the table, my lord.” The wraith pointed a shaky talon in the direction of the bowl.

“Very well.” ‘Sin Garu strode to the table, working to contain his excitement. He might have failed with the first royal prince, but there were three more royals, three more brothers providing him potential to destroy the Storm Lords and their incestuous Tetrarch.

Why men should be deemed fit to rule due to a chance of birth astounded him. When the Dark Lords had ruled Tanselm, leadership fell to those who would win it by battle and then only through the death rite.

The Storm Lords, however, believed in an incredible hand of destiny, that one of a quadruplet of royals could birth the next Tetrarch, or Royal Four, providing a continual line of rule by one family.

No chances to overthrow the system, no way to win the kingship by means of war or trickery. Only by obliterating the entire kingdom of Tanselm, its four territories and its defending spellcasters, could ‘Sin Garu wrest control of his homeland.

He only needed to kill one Storm Lord to confuse and disrupt the others. A hole in Tanselm’s defences would truly serve to open the way. But it would be even better to kill one of the Royal Four *affai*. Destroying a man’s heart and hope was imminently more satisfying than simply killing him.

The sorcerer smiled, pleased that this time he’d been more thorough with his enemy. “Well done, dark one,” he addressed his prostrate messenger. “Now go before I forget my mood and bring some light into this place.”

He chuckled at the look of horror on the wraith’s face and leaned over the scrying bowl, intent on seeing *her* again.

Reaching into his pocket for a strand of her dark red hair, he dropped it into the shallow bowl and stirred it with one elongated nail.

An image of Tessa Sheridan shimmered on the dark water. A wide smile, a straight, haughty nose and sparkling, light blue eyes stared through him at something pleasing her in her magicless little world.

“Despite your lack of magic, you can harness powers even my kind cannot,” he remarked, stroking her cheek through the water,

blurring it as he slashed her image in two. “Such a waste of beauty and brains on a Storm Lord.” He sneered, anger brewing in his belly.

“That still remains to be seen, my lord,” a dark, seductive voice answered. “I’ve just left them. And the River Prince is not happy with her—at all. I’m not sure she really is his *affai*.”

‘Sin Garu blinked up at the face of human perfection frowning thoughtfully back at him. “I’m sure of it. Keep me apprised of everything that happens there, and don’t displease me, Djinn.” He intentionally gave his informant a glimpse of blade-sharp teeth and powerful, dark blue eyes that could freeze one’s soul with a glance.

The Djinn barely masked a shudder and bowed low. Leaving with a hasty “By your leave,” the informant exited the shadows, returning to Tessa’s world in the blink of an eye.

‘Sin Garu turned a speculative look back on Tessa, then added one of Marcus’ hairs to the bowl. He paid his spies in the Light Bringers’ Western Kingdom well for results, and a piece of Marcus’ hair was worth its weight in gold. A picture of Marcus appeared, showing him as popular with Seattle’s *xiantope* idiots as he was with Tanselm’s despicable royals and commoners. No matter. ‘Sin Garu stared with loathing as the images of Tessa and Marcus merged to become one. Immediately freezing the water, he erased the present and recalled his plans already set in motion.

Now might belong to Marcus Storm and his brothers, but tomorrow, and Tanselm, would soon be his.

Chapter One

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Marcus Storm stared in disbelief at the memorandum sitting in the centre of his obsessively clean, disturbingly organised desk. His dark blue eyes flew over the page, widening with each word read.

Tessa Sheridan fought the urge to grin and tamped down the glee she knew shone in her eyes. Just seeing the frown gracing that strong, uncomfortably handsome face made her want to crow with victory. Finally. She’d gotten a rise out of ‘Cool Blue’, as half the women in the firm referred to the unconscionable playboy.

He glanced up from her latest memo with icy disdain. “You can’t believe I’ll simply accept these cutbacks?”

Much as she would have liked irritating him for the sheer hell of it, the cutback proposal she’d slaved over for a solid week was necessary if they wanted to keep his newest client profitable.

“Excuse me, Mr. Storm,” she said with exaggerated politeness. “But if Craiger-Mim Incorporated is to have a future with our firm, i.e., turn us a profit, we have to rid ourselves of some unnecessary costs which unfortunately, with Craiger’s downsized budget, can no longer be considered practical.”

He stared at her, and she could feel his gaze in the depths of her being. Just one look from him and her insides turned to mush. It had been like that from the beginning. The raven-haired, blue-eyed jerk was of the tall, dark and mouthwatering variety. He roused in her a combination of lust and dislike she had yet to reconcile, even after six months of working with him.

Correction, she mentally adjusted, as he looked at her like some kind of bug he’d like to squash. She’d worked *near* him for five months. Only recently had she been assigned to work *with* him. And her boss, Jonas Chase, knew she planned a just revenge for his complicity in partnering her with the conceited project manager.

Jonas had thought it would be funny, the Amazon versus Casanova. She still wasn’t laughing.

“Ms. Sheridan,” Storm bit out her name like an epithet. “You’re telling me I have to get rid of half my staff in order to keep Craiger-Mim profitable?”

“Yes. But by ‘cut’ I mean reassign them to other campaigns.” She could see he planned to remain firm against her proposal, and only her desire to resolve the situation enabled her to say her next words with a straight face.

“It’s no secret you’re the ‘eighth wonder’ when it comes to marketing and financial strategies,” she grudgingly conceded. “But my

forte is logistics. Trust me when I say that Mr. Conklin won't agree to your present numbers for Craiger-Mim. Much as I like the company and respect their services, Conklin won't keep them as a client unless we can show a generous profit.

"The work we've been doing for them demands recompense, and though I'm sorry about their own losses, we can't afford to be nice simply because you slept with their head of advertising."

There. She'd said what everyone on the floor had been talking about for days.

His answer, delivered with icy composure, unnerved her. "Listening to rumours, Ms. Sheridan?" He stood up from behind his desk and rounded to face her. Despite her own formidable height, he stood at least five inches taller, putting him at an intimidating six foot four.

"I would have thought a woman who has an extraordinarily friendly relationship with her boss, who wears the most provocative clothing," he paused dramatically as he ran his gaze over her body with a searing intensity, "and who consistently manages to rank at the head of the logistics department in Tomanna Consulting, would be loathe to put two and two together in the off-chance she might get five."

She stared at him, openmouthed. Had he just inferred she'd made her way to the top of the logistics branch using her body?

He smiled, a shark's grin that blurred her vision with fury.

She closed the distance between them, seething. "You want to accuse me of something, do it in plain English." She stood so close she had to tilt her head back to see him, and when she did she felt his breath fan her face.

His eyes seemed to darken as he stared down at her, their dark, ocean-blue colour flooding with navy. "You might want to watch your step," he threatened in a curiously deep voice. She saw him swallow, was close enough to see his chest swell with an indignant breath.

And then it happened like it always did. Her loins flooded with longing, her nipples tightened and her entire body ached—for *him*. Damn, damn, damn. Arguments with Marcus Storm always managed to arouse her.

But for the first time, she saw an answering response spark his eyes.

"Well, well," he murmured and stepped so close his chest brushed her breasts. "It appears I was wrong to ignore the rumours about *you*."

"Look, Storm. I—"

"Davis mentioned you've a redhead's temper and the passion to match. And since he supposedly screwed your brains out last weekend, I assume he'd know."

Speechless, she stared at him, unable to think of anything but punching the arrogance off his full lips. And just wait until she got a hold of that lying, scheming Davis...

"Now, now," he tsked, grabbing and holding her clenched fists by her sides. "Violence isn't the answer. Let's try this instead."

He covered her mouth with his own, an aggressive mating of the lips and tongue that belied his cool exterior. His lips turned hard, and the iron ridge that prodded her stomach only made him that much more tempting.

What he'd said, what she'd said, faded from her mind as all-consuming lust flooded her. Apparently he felt it as well, for he growled low in his throat and crushed her against him, the corded strength hidden under his designer suit evident in the ease with which he held her fast.

His lips slanted over hers, his tongue plunging and dipping, making her lightheaded and wet with need. His steely erection burned against her abdomen, rubbing with no pretence but to seek relief. She throbbed, wanting to feel that ridge stroking, sliding deep within her folds.

Then he did the unthinkable. He stopped.

Stepping back from her, he returned to his desk and sat with aplomb, as if their coming together hadn't happened. Aware she still shook with desire but unable to stop it, she stared in disbelief at his rigid control.

"Apparently Davis was right."

She blinked, feeling perilously close to tears. That she had to blink to keep the tears from falling brought her to her senses. She'd be damned if this jerk would make her cry in an office she had more right to than he ever would. She'd worked twice as hard and come twice as far in her career as any man at this company.

Screw Davis, and screw Marcus Storm. Mentally composing herself, she decided to take off the kid gloves. Two could play at his game, and she planned on winning.

"Rumours, Marcus?" she said, leaning down towards him. She licked her lips and his eyes narrowed. "Well, if you want the *truth*, Davis isn't the only one getting nailed. I'm off to lunch with Judy Hardenmeier, Conklin's right hand. Those cutbacks I proposed," she paused and dipped lower, satisfied when his gaze followed the rise and fall of her breasts exposed by her gaping shirt.

She waited until his eyes returned to hers before she lowered the boom. "They're as good as done. So prepare for a lot of overtime, *stud*. You'll soon be juggling three jobs for the price of one."

Marcus called himself five kinds of fool as he watched Tessa

Sheridan's perfect ass saunter out his door. Not being able to control his libido was not an excuse to bring the woman near to tears. Oh yes, she'd recovered more than admirably, but he'd seen the bright sheen in her eyes after his cutting remark about Davis, who was, by all accounts, a chauvinistic asshole. But hell, he'd been a hair's breadth from fucking her on his desk.

He sat still and focused on his breathing, on an image of his mother, on anything to relax the burning ache in his groin. Tessa somehow always managed to stir him, though until now, he'd been able to conceal his response.

Since Jonas Chase had thrust her into Marcus' operation, things were quickly coming to a head.

Never before had Marcus acted so disrespectfully, so rudely to a woman. That he did so now, to a woman who had done nothing more than voice what his own secretary and half the floor thought true, was unforgivable. Shame flooded him until he wanted to sink through the floor.

He shouldn't have pushed her, but he hadn't expected her, of all people, to believe the stupid rumours. Tessa Sheridan had never acted anything but professionally and had a sterling reputation as the firm's logistical expert.

She never failed to solve any problem she encountered. And she was the only woman he'd ever met who avoided him like the plague, at least until last month. Before then, he'd vaguely sensed her presence, too inundated with work and the situation at home to take notice of the bossy redhead at the centre of every Tomanna Consulting man's fantasy.

Instead, he'd focused on the tedious work he did for Tomanna, unwilling to face the realisation that Tanselm, his precious homeland, seemed so far out of reach. Had it only been a year since he'd been there? A year since he'd poured himself into a prince's duties in the Royal House? Since he'd immersed himself in elemental magic and the natural beauty of Tanselm's rich lakes and streams?

If only 'Sin Garu, that evil wretch of a sorcerer, had contented himself with the dark lands and left Tanselm alone. If only that scourge upon the living, the *Netharat*, could be killed as swiftly as they were created. If only, if only...

He glared at the door from behind his desk and watched with dark satisfaction when it banged shut. Then, floating an empty glass from a nearby sink to his desk, he waved his hand over it and watched it fill with water, as pure and clear as Tanselm's deepest wells.

He sighed. That one of Tanselm's great Storm Lords was now reduced to petty financial squabbles and immature spats with a woman didn't bear dwelling upon. He tossed back his water and

slammed his cup on the desk. He had more than a weekend's worth of work due by ten Monday morning, and were it not for his mission to find a bride from this magic-forsaken land and return home to fight for his world, he'd quit this place and everyone in it.

Unfortunately, he had to admit this position placed him in an ideal circumstance to find a suitable bride for a man of his status. His brothers might be content searching for a heartmate in a bar, but Marcus had higher standards. Darius had gotten lucky with Samantha. It was doubtful Cadmus, assuming Darius' role as a bartender, would find himself similarly blessed.

No, Marcus needed to wait it out in this mundane realm, servicing the rich and prosperous. Sooner or later he'd find a woman to serve as his *affai*, his intended bride. Until then, he'd continue to apply the persuasive strategies he'd learned as a boy, focusing on the here and now.

But much as he tried to ignore it, his heart still yearned. What he wouldn't give to hear someone from the royal kingdom once again have need of the River Prince.

Tessa slammed into her apartment, threw her keys at the hall table, and huffed into the nearest overstuffed chair, cursing Marcus Storm to everlasting celibate hell.

The minute she'd walked out his office door, she'd come up with several more satisfying rejoinders aimed at his shortcomings as a project manager, as a man, and as a human being in general.

Her little goad about the proposed cutbacks becoming a reality, in retrospect, wasn't as gratifying as slurs on his character and his abilities as a lover would have been.

Her face heated, recalling his skilful mouth and persuasive tongue. Damn it all! She'd been having such a nice Friday too.

She smouldered as she sat in her favourite chair, waiting for the soft leather and deep cushions to soak away the tension. Resting her head back, she closed her eyes and after several deep, measuring breaths, slowly began to relax. Her parched throat demanded something cool to drink, but she felt too comfortable to get up.

Peace and quiet replaced the stress that had hounded her all week, and as weariness invaded her limbs, she began to drift into a light doze.

Without warning, something ice cold and wet nudged her hand, and she shot out of the chair in a shriek. Tumbling backward, she managed to land less than gracefully on the floor.

Her heart racing, she shoved her hair out of her eyes and stared around for the source of her surprise. Anxiety mounted until she noted the water bottle dripping with condensation to her immediate left,

floating in the air!

"Not again," she groaned, grudgingly accepting what her subconscious had ferreted from the refrigerator. Grabbing the bottle, she gingerly regained her feet and trudged to the couch. Telekinesis was such a pain in the ass. *Literally*, she thought as she rubbed her posterior.

At least her short bout with pyrokinesis hadn't returned. Since Charles Johnson had left the company, she hadn't experienced any more repeats of setting her sheets on fire. Now, however, an apparent telekinetic resided at Tomanna Consulting, either that or elderly Mrs. Morris next door had a sudden gift for moving things with her mind.

For as long as she could remember, Tessa had been gifted with strange and unexpected extrasensory perception. To this day she still wasn't sure how she could do what she did, but concluded she possessed an unusual ability to 'siphon' the latent ESP from those gifted around her. Unfortunately, as she'd matured, her powers strengthened, as did the hit-or-miss control that accompanied them.

She wished she knew what triggered the siphoning. Johnson, the pyro, had been at the company for three months before her bouts with fire had started. And as soon as he'd transferred, her pyrokinesis had vanished.

Since no one had moved into her direct neighbourhood within the last six months, her abilities had to come from someone at work, where she spent the majority of her time. She'd found, over the years, that close proximity to the 'target' helped her to control the powers, and at times, call upon them at will.

But with the amount of personnel changes, her target could be anyone. Hell, it could even be Marcus Storm.

Reminders of the arrogant Lothario made her body tingle. She'd known at first sight he'd be dangerous. Hell, he'd made her body sing on a whisper of breath.

Sensuality flooded her veins, washing her in the ecstatic sensations he'd stirred earlier. No doubt about it, he was a jerk. But for a few moments she'd forgotten his attitude and indulged in something very bad for her. And it had felt so very, very good.

Sighing, she took a large swig of water and realised how desperate she was to desire a man as cold as Marcus Storm. The foreplay with Storm and the nonexistent sex with Davis notwithstanding, she couldn't recall the last meaningful, intimate interaction she'd had with a man. Could she be any more pathetic?

The phone rang, startling her out of her reverie.

She stared across the room at the telephone. Chances were she had not won Publisher's Clearinghouse, so why answer? Why cap off a less than perfect day with more bad news?

“Tessa? You’d better pick up,” her brother’s deep voice persuaded over the answering machine. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you today, and I have a bad feeling trouble’s just around the corner.”

She let out a loud curse and crossed to the kitchen to grab the phone. When the clairvoyant in the family had a bad feeling, worse would surely follow.

“Lay it on me, Tom,” she muttered with feeling. “But be gentle. I’ve had a long day.”

“Sorry, Sis, but it’s about to get longer.”

Chapter Two

Marcus groaned as the sun hit him right between the eyes. He'd been hoping to sleep in this morning, having worked another late night into the early a.m.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," a wry masculine voice chided. "I even brought you a cup of coffee."

"That's the only thing saving your annoying ass, Cadmus," Marcus muttered as he opened his eyes. He sat up and grabbed the coffee with an irritated curse.

"Touchy." Cadmus grinned, his identical features buoyant, in stern contrast to the scowl darkening Marcus' face. "Just wanted to check on you. Aerolus and I are concerned about the long hours you've been putting in at work." Cadmus took a sip of his own coffee and frowned. "What's so important at your play job that you've twice missed Aerolus' meetings?"

"Aerolus' meetings? He dabbles in sorcery, and now he thinks he's in charge?"

"Well, why shouldn't he be in charge? What is it with you and Darius, anyway?" Cadmus scowled, mentioning their absent and newly married brother. "He thinks he's in charge because he's the oldest, and now that he's gone, you're falling into the same line. Hell, Marcus, need I remind you we're quadruplets, *identical quadruplets*?" His burning brown eyes sparked with irritation.

Marcus cocked his right brow, further aggravating Cadmus, as he'd intended. As Cadmus glowered, Marcus felt the morning's misery fade under grudging amusement. "Quadruplets, yes, but not quite identical. Those muddy brown eyes of yours won't guarantee you a quality *affai*."

Cadmus snorted. "By 'quality *affai*' you mean 'wealthy bride'. You're such a snob, *Marc*." He grinned nastily at the face Marcus made. Damn, but Marcus hated the informal, shortened use of his name. And he had Darius' wife Samantha to thank for that. Wonderful woman.

"But you're wrong about, and I quote, my 'gorgeous, rich chocolate-brown eyes', Marc," Cadmus continued. "Working at the bar has put me in contact with hundreds of women."

"All too drunk to know their left from their right."

"Some, yeah, but not all." Cadmus paused and Marcus had the odd suspicion Cadmus was focused on a specific woman. Then a sudden image of Tessa Sheridan flashed through Marcus' mind, blurring all thoughts of teasing.

"Women are nothing but trouble," he said coolly, purposefully

steeling his reaction to the fiery redhead. "It's because of them we're still here. If Arim would allow us home without having to find a miserable bride, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Instead we'd be sending the *Netharat* back into hell where they belong."

"Until 'Sin Garu showed. Then we'd be fighting a losing battle. Until we reestablish the royal line, we're stuck here, brother mine."

Marcus scowled. He hated the reminder that without an *affai* he was stuck in this mundane realm. More and more lately he'd been itching to revisit Tanselm. Since Darius had returned home, Marcus' longing for all they'd left behind had only increased. And his frustrating bouts with Tessa furthered his aggravation. It was as if he needed something just out of reach.

"Don't tell me. It's a woman." Cadmus stared at Marcus with eerie perception. "I may not have Darius' telepathy, but I know woman problems." He grinned, a familiar dimple on his left cheek. "I'm a bartender, remember? I study human nature for a living."

"Very funny." Marcus swallowed a hot mouthful of coffee and fought not to show the burn. He failed and glared at Cadmus, who didn't even try to hide his laughter. "It's not what you think."

"Oh?"

"The woman bothers the hell out of me. It's nothing more personal than that."

"So she's not attractive?"

Marcus frowned. "I didn't say that." No, Tessa was downright gorgeous. "My point is there's nothing between us but work." *Except the way my blood rushes every time I see her. And that mouthwatering foreplay last night...*

"Right."

Apparently his blasé attitude wasn't convincing Cadmus either.

"Look, Cadmus. The woman is earthbound. She couldn't possibly handle the power within me."

"That's just what Darius thought about Samantha."

Marcus' foul mood returned with a vengeance. He wanted a bride as much as he wanted to rule one of the kingdoms—*not at all*. And neither bride nor kingdom would make him prince enough to fill his father's shoes.

He gritted his teeth, energy sizzling within him at the effort not to throw Cadmus bodily out the door. "I am done having this conversation."

Cadmus stood from the bed and made a regal bow, his mouth curled with laughter. "As you command, my liege," he said. "Man, you do the royalty bit better than any of us. Of course, you were born with the royal stick up your ass, so it makes sense."

At the end of his tether and feeling more like his hotheaded

brother, Darius, than ever, Marcus released the dam on his powers and literally threw his brother out the door without batting an eye. He added insult to injury by smirking as he slammed the door shut in Cadmus' face to stop the retribution sure to follow.

Foul curses rent the air beyond his room, music to his ears, as Marcus drank the rest of his coffee. His belly pleasantly warmed, he leant back and closed his eyes, restful now that he'd unburdened some frustration on his more-than-deserving sibling.

With a weary sigh, he wondered how long he could delay leaving his bed before worries about work caught up with him. He couldn't help it. Normally, if he thought about work, he could hold his anxiety for Tanselm at bay. Yet work, right now, bothered him almost as much as Tanselm's uncertain future. Every time he thought about Tomanna Consulting, he envisioned Tessa and her mouthwatering sensuality.

His body tensed, and he forced his fists to unclench. He needed a respite from the stresses in his life. And if he couldn't find a break in his own bedroom, he was surely doomed. Closing his eyes and deliberately slowing his breathing, he repeated the lessons of inner peace taught to him by his father so many years ago and gave way to the dreamlessness of sleep—at first.

"You're doing well, Son," King Faustus said as he slapped Marcus on the back with a mighty blow strong enough to fell a tree. Marcus refused to flinch and his father laughed, likely pleased to see his son standing tall after so many years of conditioning.

Marcus stared in confusion at his father and himself, both clad in their royal finery as they stood in a hazy hallway reminiscent of the princes' wing in the palace of the Western Kingdom.

"Father?"

"Don't worry. I won't keep you long. I know you've got company coming." His father winked and nodded knowingly to the royal bathing suite concealed behind a large blue door.

"Where did Seattle go? Am I really home? And what are you doing here?"

"Tsk, ts. Always the worrier. Enjoy the moment, boy. Live a little."

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" Sadly, he had to be. His father had died over a year ago, under 'Sin Garu's treacherous hands.

"If you say so." His father stopped and looked at the door. The muffled sound of feminine laughter and water splashing teased the silence. "But it's not a bad dream, is it?"

"No." Marcus stood uncomfortably, aware he wasn't saying the right things, behaving as befitted a prince. He hated that he sounded

so unsure.

Faustus sighed, and Marcus wanted to sigh as well, at his own shortcomings. "Boy, you need to stop thinking so damned much and live. This job you're working is only a means to an end." His father nodded to the door. "To an end," he repeated with emphasis.

"But I don't—"

"You will." His father grabbed him by the arm and gathered a swift wind to carry them both to the doorway. "You're not a windwalker like me, Son. You're a waterglider like your Uncle Tridon." He nodded to the door. "Now show her some smooth moves and work your magic." His father's laughing grey eyes sobered. "Time is running out."

So saying, his father blew him through the door. The moment Marcus entered, the door behind him vanished, leaving him in a room with no doors or windows, nothing to mar the monochromatic, pale blue walls and tiled floor save the large, clear pool before him and the vision that dwelled within.

"What are you waiting for, Marcus?" Tessa Sheridan asked in a naughty voice. She leant back against the wall of the massive bathing pool, one large enough to fit several dozen people quite comfortably. Her arms were outstretched along the ledge, her breasts clearly visible, swaying in the waves of the water.

She had piled her hair on top of her head in a loose knot, exposing a graceful length of creamy white neck. Her face glowed with a sensual energy, and a hunger for him and him alone.

Marcus could only blink in shock. First his father and now Tessa? Talk about 'too good to be true'. Not about to waste any more time gawking, he gave her a seductive smile and slid into the water, his clothes disappearing like magic.

He stroked towards her without thought, at home in the water as he was nowhere else. With a surety that slid through his body like song, he swam fluidly, at one with his element. He was at Tessa's side in an instant.

"I've been waiting." She pouted, her full lips drawn in a poised frown.

"Too long," he agreed. Reaching out, he fondled her bare breast, his hand curling around her flesh like the water that so lovingly embraced her.

She gasped and threw her head back, and he covered her like an all-encompassing wave. His mouth found hers with ease, slipping into her moist warmth with welcomed acceptance. Her tongue teased his, battled for mastery and gracefully conceded to his strength.

He couldn't keep from groaning at how perfect she felt in his arms. Like the other day in his office, her curves rubbed him in all the

right places. Her skin felt silky smooth under his touch. Her breasts and strong, smooth thighs swam against him with need, magnifying his lust.

His cock was full, painfully hard and *near* to bursting just from touching her. He could only imagine what loving her would be like.

She had long fingers, and she stroked him as if she knew just where to touch him. Ah, but it was his dream, he reminded himself, and with that in mind, he let down all his barriers.

Gone was the subtle charmer with the cool, blue stare. In his place churned a harsher, less patient lover. At another time he would indulge his fantasies and explore the woman who so fascinated him. But now he needed release, an escape from the stresses and the never-ending sexual ache that plagued him whenever she neared.

He caged her between his arms, his hands gripping the pool's ledge. Pinning her against the wall of the pool, he shoved her legs apart under the water, engaging telepathy and his command of water to shape her body as he desired. The water held her limbs fast, her thighs outstretched, her arms imprisoned on either side of her body. Her helplessness further excited him at finally having the assertive woman under his control.

He saw her answering desire as his flesh grazed hers. Tessa's need washed over him, inciting his lust even further. Without pause he surged deep inside her in one long, harsh breath. She gasped and tried to move, but his will held her still as he began thrusting inside her.

"More," she panted, and he increased the pace. Her slick walls accommodated him with ease, and the more he pummelled, the hotter she grew. She writhed and moaned his name, seeming as eager to have him touch her as he was to feel her responses.

His hands roamed over her wet flesh, grazing her nipples and flicking them with his tongue as his cock delved into her sweet cream.

"Later, *sertia*," he rasped as he thrust. "Later I'll lap your honey with my tongue, and I'll make you come so hard you'll beg me to do it all over again. Anywhere, anyplace."

She gasped and groaned his name as waves of passion crashed over her. Nodding helplessly, she gave something of herself to him when she opened her desire-glazed eyes. Awash in feminine energy that shimmered with power, Marcus could no longer hold onto his control.

Her pussy clenched and sucked him further into her core, and he plunged deeper and harder until his climax burst over him. Hot seed jetted from his cock, quickening through flesh and fluid to the pure heart of her energy.

On and on his orgasm rushed, making him lightheaded as her power washed over him. When she had drained him of his passion, he

gazed down at her awestruck expression with a pleased one of his own.

Her full, parted lips reminded him of the danger-sweet cherries growing wild in Tanselm's forests. Once past the spiny protective layer coating the fruit, the sweetness of the berry burst upon the tongue, leaving an unforgettable taste.

Running a finger over her petal-soft mouth, he watched with satisfaction as her pupils dilated, passion spiralling once again.

"You aren't as immune to me as you'd like me to think," he murmured, recalling the many instances at work when she'd avoided him.

"Maybe." Her eyes locked on his, full of fiery desire and spirit that made him want to devour her whole. Incredibly, he felt aroused all over again. The water churned around him, responsive to his feelings.

"Tell me what you really want, Tessa." He resumed thrusting inside her, slowly, as his cock hardened with each stroke deeper into her honeyed core.

She kissed his nipples as he thrust, her mouth exciting him into a frenzy of need. Her lips pulled and tugged, eating away at his control. Soft, silken limbs broke free from his will holding her tight, touching and tantalising until he felt his climax upon him.

"I want *you*, Marcus. The River Prince, king of my heart, lord of my soul, father of my sons—"

A bright light flashed, and Marcus sat up with a groan as he spilled into the satin sheets covering his bed. He shook as his orgasm consumed him, panting for breath as Tessa's phantom eased his sexual needs. Staring around him with wide eyes, it took Marcus a moment to realise his time with Tessa had been nothing but a fantasy.

Catching his breath, he stared down at his messed sheets, wondering how in the hell this had happened. Sure, he'd been without a woman for a few weeks, but he'd been without one for longer and hadn't exploded from a mere dream.

Frowning, he wondered just what had happened, and if his experience had been a dream, or something far more significant.

Tessa woke with her heart pounding and no idea why. She stared unseeingly at her white ceiling, counting the cracks around her light fixture until she could catch her breath. A glance at her alarm clock showed Saturday had arrived, the time and the sun's rays attesting to the lateness of morning.

Instead of feeling rested, however, she felt shaky and a bit dizzy, and for the life of her she couldn't recall what she'd been dreaming about.

After her whopper of a Friday, she'd retired to bed early, fantasising about making Marcus Storm look like the jerk he was in front of her company's bevy of female clients.

Wearing a loincloth and nothing else, her eye-candy would apologise until he was hoarse, worshipping her with his eyes while steadfastly promising never again to sleep with his clients.

Tessa's eyes widened as she remembered she'd accused the company's wonder boy of doing just that, and for a moment she couldn't think. The reality of yesterday hit her, and she slumped deeper into her bed.

After stirring her libido, Marcus Storm, seemingly unaffected by their encounter, had dashed her confidence to shreds by leaving her shaking like a leaf and bereft in front of his desk. Then he'd had the gall to accuse her of sleeping with Davis. As if she'd do anything that repulsive...

But hadn't she accused him of something similar? her conscience asked. "But it was something I'd heard from almost everyone on his floor." *And since when do I listen to the company grapevine?*

Shame flooded her and she knew the decent thing, no matter what a conceited ass Marcus Storm might be, would be to apologise for making such an accusation. He might be a jerk, but that didn't mean she had to act like one. Tessa was a Sheridan. She had standards.

Making the decision to right the wrong she'd committed felt good, until she recalled part two of her disaster of a Friday. Her brother's phone call had ended her less than perfect day perfectly.

Wanting to cry but unable to summon useless tears, she instead made plans to solve this latest dilemma. Though her life was taking a dramatic turn for the worse lately, she could only be glad for her family's odd penchant for weirdness.

Without Tom's precognitive abilities, she would certainly have walked into work on Monday completely unprepared for the charges of fraud and misappropriation of funds. Now that she knew what awaited her, she had only to find out who wanted to frame her and how they intended to do it in order to avoid jail time. Marcus Storm came to mind, yet she immediately rejected the idea of his complicity. No. Storm, though a ladies' man, was an honest man. It couldn't be him.

But hadn't Tom experienced his premonition right after her altercation with Storm this afternoon? Almost to the exact minute when she'd locked lips with the handsome devil. Anxiety plagued her as she tried to figure who wanted her out of the company so badly. Twisting her hands under the covers, she reluctantly rose and began her chores, all the while thinking.

The remainder of her afternoon passed swiftly while she planned and plotted. Between dusting, laundry and general clean-up, she devised a thorough if shaky idea for discerning who might want to frame her. Unfortunately, she had come up with several people who might have designs on her job and reputation.

The hour grew later, and she forced herself to eat a hearty dinner, needing the energy. Tom might have been a bit more detailed with his bad news, she mentally grumbled, finishing dinner and then the dishes. She watched as the sky darkened from indigo to black, while the waning moon hid behind a thin blanket of clouds. And as she dressed in neat, black, close-fitting clothing, she tried to think on the bright side.

At least she now had plans for what would have been a boring, dateless Saturday night.

Chapter Three

Sneaking into Tomanna had been frighteningly easy. The Harmon building was open twenty-four hours a day, the elevators unrestricted up to the seventeenth floor. Taking the stairs, she huffed up eight flights and carefully exited to find the lobby dark. The security guard she thought she'd have to avoid was nowhere in sight.

Tessa frowned. She would speak to her boss about security's gaps on Monday, *after* she made sure her neck was no longer on the chopping block.

Tomanna had an eerie feel at night, with only a faint amount of light shining through the hall windows at the far end of hallway. This hall was fairly safe, mostly dark. But as soon as she rounded the bend, she would feel exposed by the frail moonlight that played peek-a-boo with the clouds.

The layout of each floor was consistent—an elevator at one end, and the stairwell and a set of large glass windows at the opposite end, both framing the large square hallway encompassing at least thirty private offices along the corridor.

She had five rooms to check at the end of this particular passage, and the tentative moonlight really bugged her. Uneasy about her visibility, she lowered the nondescript ball cap over her eyes and used her flashlight sparingly, relying more on memory to guide her than artificial light. Four security guards patrolled Tomanna's two floors in the twenty-story Harmon building, and with her luck, one of them would spot her handy Maglight.

An hour and a half later, after nosing through the offices of seven of the twelve suspects whom she imagined might have wanted her fired, she ducked into a dimly lit storage locker to regroup. Gathering her thoughts, she grabbed her list from the back pocket of her jeans and rechecked her names.

So far she'd eliminated the people she'd competed with for her current position in the company. Nice to know her peers had taken losing their last promotion in stride.

Now, on to the remaining five. Her eyes continued to linger on the name *Marcus Storm*, which, in good conscience, she'd been unable to leave from her list. They'd had a hell of a confrontation yesterday—her pulse leapt at the remembrance—and with Tom's timely little premonition rearing its head, she knew she'd be foolish to write him off.

Irritated at how much she wanted Storm to be innocent of wrongdoing, she resolved to check his office next. Davis and the others she'd search after she took care of Storm.

She returned the list to her pocket and listened for any movement before opening and shutting the door quickly. Whoever thought keeping the storage closets lit twenty-four hours a day needed a lesson in energy conservation. She decided to approach Jonas about that on Monday, in addition to the lacking security.

Walking quietly down the hallway, she found the exit and walked up the stairs. There she stole silently towards the 'Devil's Den', what she sarcastically called Storm's office.

She jiggled the handle, not surprised he kept it locked when everyone else she'd checked had left their doors unlocked. Muttering under her breath, she reached for her spare keys and unlocked the door. It paid having friends in the janitorial department, and she made a mental note to bring Greg the homemade snickerdoodles he liked so much.

Weak light filtered into the room via two overly large windows, giving Tessa an easy look around Storm's office. She made sure the blinds on his office door were closed, then set to work.

After twenty minutes of searching and a steadily growing headache, she leant back in his surprisingly comfortable leather chair. *Just as I thought, he spends too much time working and womanizing. He wouldn't have time to set me up between working the Craiger-Mim account and seducing his latest dim-witted Barbie look-alike.*

That comment had little to do with rumour and everything to do with the scene she'd witnessed a month ago, her conscience asserted. Lunching inside Lacall's Eatery on a much-deserved day off, she'd been stunned to watch Marcus breaking up with Darla Mitchell, the Mitchell Publishing heiress, on a very public street corner.

Granted, Storm had the looks, and she grudgingly admitted, the charisma to charm his way into any woman's bed. But he really needed to perfect his break-ups.

Covering a yawn with her hand, she froze when she heard a faint scratching from within the room. She knew no one was in his private bathroom, but she hadn't checked the closet on the far side of the office. And why would anyone be hiding in Marcus Storm's closet in the dark on a Saturday night, anyway?

The scratching turned into a steady ticking. Her eyes widened as she noted a fountain pen rolling of its own volition across the floor where it must have fallen, up the side and across the top of his desk to lay in front of her.

The list from her back pocket flew out of her jeans and over her shoulder to flap in her face before falling to the desktop next to the pen.

Frazzled, Tessa could only stare, wondering why the hell this telekinesis had to start up again when it had been dormant since her

experience yesterday after work.

Then the office door flew open and she stared, horrified, at an equally shocked Marcus Storm.

She'd been in his thoughts all day and now sat behind his desk, in his office. So much for an escape from Tessa Sheridan. Marcus' eyes narrowed.

"What are you doing here?" she croaked, looking like a sexy stalker in a black hat and jacket.

He cocked a brow, pleased when she swallowed audibly. "Sorry, I was under the impression this was *my* office."

"But it's Saturday night!"

"And?" He glanced at his desk, curious about the paper she seemed intent on covering. "Isn't that my Waterman?" he referred to his fountain pen, an expensive gift from a happy client.

"Oh, uh, yeah." She stared down at it with distaste, as if expecting it to jump up and bite her. "It was on the floor. You must have dropped it."

Marcus closed the door behind him and leant back against it, amused at the polite dance of words between them. Her bright blue eyes looked nervous, worried, and a tad, angry? His mood brightened despite the circumstances. He thoroughly enjoyed watching Tessa lose her temper.

"I suppose I should ask what you're doing in here." He studied his fingernails, then glanced up casually at her stark-white face.

"Uh, well, yes, you probably should." She licked her lips and he wanted to groan. Of all the actions to take to get out of this mess, seducing him would by far be the worst, for both their sakes.

"Tessa?" he prodded.

"My mouth is drier than a field of cotton." A sudden clamour from the vicinity of his mini-refrigerator caught his attention, but he swiftly turned back to Tessa when he heard a groan.

She had her head in her hands, her face pressed against the top of his desk.

"Are you alright?"

"Fine," she mumbled and lifted her head, then whipped off her hat, showcasing her glorious, fiery red hair. "I'm dandy. Just great. Another five minutes and we could have avoided this." She looked from him to the refrigerator.

"About 'this'," he began, determined to keep the desk between them as he sat across from her. All too easily his mind recaptured the feel of her breasts under his palms, of her sweet mouth melting like candy beneath his tongue. "I think I'm due an explanation."

Her baby-blue eyes widened until he swore he could see an echo

of blue tile from his earlier dream. "You have to be royally pissed I'm in here, not to mention secretly jumping for joy that you've now got something to hold over my head for the rest of my life. How can you sit there so calmly?"

His heart raced, the thought of having Tessa under his thumb extremely tempting. Imagining the fiery woman on her knees shook him to the quick. But a backbone of honour steeled his thoughts, and he mentally shook his head.

"Before we get into what promises to be your extremely interesting explanation, I need to say something." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for my unwanted attentions yesterday."

His voice sounded stilted to his own ears, so he could imagine how inane he must sound to her. Odd, but he'd never had so much trouble dealing with a woman before in his life.

She didn't blink. "You're sorry?"

He nodded.

"Sorry for your, and I quote, 'unwanted attentions'?"

"Yes." He held his irritation at bay. He had wronged her, no matter that her body had accepted his all too readily.

"You sure are a piece of work, Storm." Her eyes glittered, and he realised, with some surprise, she was angry.

"Now what?"

"Nothing." He could see her eyes smouldering, and his body responded with unadulterated desire. She cleared her throat. "I had planned on offering my apologies as well. I shouldn't have accused you of sleeping with one of your clients."

"No, you shouldn't have," he said, mystified to hear *her* apologise.

"But you must know everyone's been talking about it," she added. "The only reason I actually believed the rumours is because Sheila Covington herself up and told the secretaries you slept with her." She blushed as she said it, but maintained eye contact.

So, Sheila had told everyone they'd been intimate. He should have guessed. She hadn't taken his rejection well at all, even as gently as he'd given it.

"For the record, Tessa," he said, his voice low. "Sheila Covington doesn't like to hear the word 'no', any more than Michael Davis does, I'd imagine." She stared, her expression turning from one of understanding to one of contrition. "I love Craiger-Mim's possibilities, so I suppose I've been overly tolerant where Sheila's concerned. Had I known to what lengths she would go to get my attention, I'd have handled her differently," he said quietly, more to himself than her.

"I really am sorry," Tessa said after a pause. "I don't listen to office gossip as a rule, but, well, you are known for being, ah..."

"Discerning?" he finished for her. "Choosy? Popular with the

ladies? Is that what you were going to say?" He couldn't help but grin.

Her eyes sparkled with laughter and a grudging smile curled her lips. "More or less."

"Well, now that's out of the way, how about you tell me what this is all about?"

He wanted to see the paper she edged closer to her jacket and gave it a subtle mental tug. With a gasp, she watched it fall over the edge of the desk towards him. He leant to grab it but could only stare in amazement when the paper reversed direction and glided back across the desk to land in her hands.

Their eyes met across the desk, his questioning, hers accusing.

"It's you," she said and rubbed her eyes. "I should have known."

Marcus' thoughts racing, he stared from the paper to Tessa's suspicious gaze. "You moved that. With your mind," he said evenly, almost hoping she would deny it.

"Well, the only reason I can do that is because you can."

"What?"

"Tell me you didn't just take it from me. Come on, Marcus. I dare you to try that again."

Amazed he was having this conversation when he still wanted answers as to why she was in his office at midnight on the weekend, he stole the paper back from her with a brief telekinetic snap.

She shook her head, angry again. "Of *course* it had to be you."

His attention caught by the list in his hands, he frowned as he read it. "What is this?"

"Why not tell you? If I don't, you might read my mind." Her voice was hard, and not at all wary of his telepathy. "That is a list of all the people who might want to see me fired from Tomanna."

"What?" Then a new understanding dawned. "I'm on this list!"

She sighed. "Well, we did argue yesterday before locking lips."

He couldn't help feeling affronted. "I'd never try to do you harm." He couldn't believe she thought so badly of him. *Well, that's what came of succumbing to base instincts*, he thought as he remembered attacking her in front of his desk. "Yesterday—"

"Forget about it." She blushed. "I'm sorry I mentioned it. And I wouldn't have added you to my list except," she paused, flagging his curiosity.

"Except?"

"Never mind. Can't we just forget about this?"

He could only stare at her. "Forget about this? First you break into my office. Then you use your mind to move my pen, which I know for a fact is far beyond normal for," he paused, about to say *one of your kind*, "anyone. You have a list of people who want to ruin you, and I'm on it! By the Light, we'll talk about this!"

She frowned. "By the Light? What light?"

The woman had trouble staying on subject. "Never mind. Tell me again what this list represents." He noted Michael Davis on the list, as well as several of Tomanna's logisticians. "And don't think we're not going to discuss our tug-of-war over my pen."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course we'll discuss it." Then she arched her brow into an exact replica of his favourite expression. "We'll also talk about your macho seduction yesterday."

"Which worked," he added smoothly, pleased when she flushed and stammered a denial. "Much as I regret my behaviour, I don't regret what I learned from the experience. But we'll return to that later," he promised, in control once more.

Sparring with Tessa revitalised him, made him feel strong and surprisingly like a man worthy of holding his own with his contemporaries. He eyed her with a mixture of desire and curiosity, wanting to know about her now more than ever.

"Tell me about the list, Tessa," he said softly, disconcerting her.

She stared at him for a minute before conceding. "I have a very good source who informed me someone at the company wants me gone."

"Gone?"

"As in arrested on charges of embezzlement, for starters."

"But why?"

"Good question. Unfortunately, I don't know. I came up with that list of people, the only ones I could think of that might want me out of the way. The five logisticians and I competed for my last promotion. But they're clean."

"You already searched their offices?" His focus was clear, though a myriad questions floated in the recesses of his mind.

"Yeah. No paper or computer trail to follow. I also crossed two of the secretaries on this floor off the list."

"Why them?"

She bit her lip. "I may have said some uncomplimentary things about you in their hearing."

A small smile tugged his lips. "My staff is fiercely loyal."

"I know," she added glumly. "But neither of them had anything suspicious in their files either. I have five, no, four more candidates to study since you're off the list."

"Thanks," he murmured wryly. "But what do you hope to find?"

"Something within a logistics frame, obviously, that shows me squandering company funds."

"I still don't understand why they'd be after you," he said, unable to think of any reason to rid the firm of Tessa. From what he could tell, everyone from her boss to the company staff thought the woman

walked on water.

"I don't either. But I know if I don't find this supposed evidence against me before Monday, I'll be facing the police."

Marcus stared at the wound-up redhead nearly bouncing in his chair. Irritating, emotional, passionate—she was all those, and much more. But a criminal? One look into her clear blue eyes and anyone could see her strength of integrity.

Odd, but he'd never before noticed the power behind her pure, blue gaze. He frowned and circled the desk to pull her to her feet.

"What?" she asked with a frown.

Words caught in his throat. A wave of cold evil washed over him at the same time Tessa's eyes widened in horror at something over his shoulder.

Without thought, Marcus threw them both to the floor, narrowly avoiding a freezing blast of blue fire that seared its way into the desk.

"What the hell?" Tessa stared in shock, and he felt a rush of power move from her and *through* him towards the threat.

Rolling to his feet, he watched as a wraith, one of the dreaded *Netharat*, clutched at its rotting, lumpy and hairless skull. Marcus glanced back at Tessa, a question in his eyes, when he felt the pressure in the room increase, a sure signal of more unwelcome visitors.

There would be time for questions later, he told himself, and faced two more wraiths that appeared out of nowhere, directly in front of him. He attacked, angry beyond measure that evil continued to spread into this as yet untainted world. The wraiths gurgled with fear as water began filling every crevice of their bodies. The magical waters touched only the *Netharat*, washing over and around them in a blur of motion.

They drowned in the torturous waters conjured by Marcus' elemental reserves, their white eyes darkening to black, threats no more. Then they slowly faded into nothingness, disappearing into that dark place beyond worlds.

He heard Tessa curse in disbelief but kept his attention on the remaining wraith regaining its feet by the wall.

Marcus' fountain pen flew by his left cheek and embedded itself into the creature's forehead. The wraith howled in pain, but the superficial wound only served to aggravate it further. Considering how outmatched she was by both himself and the creature, Marcus couldn't help admiring Tessa's determination, and that admiration only added to her allure.

"Stay back, Tessa," he said softly, his handle on the situation firm. Pleased as he was by her courage, he didn't need the distraction. It only took a moment of inattention to become *Netharat* kill. Wanting the creature gone and away from Tessa, he pulled his power inward,

readying for a final confrontation.

“Why are you here, minion?” he asked the wraith in its native language.

Its jaw opened in surprise, revealing three rows of black, stained teeth, sharpened into menacing points. “You’ve a command of my language, eh, Storm Lord?” It laughed, a grating whine that made Marcus’ head ache, and continued in English, apparently for Tessa’s benefit. “How nice. My lord might have more fun with you than he’d planned.”

“What do you do here, *morlah*?” *Unclean one*.

“I’ve come to play,” the wraith said, the yellow and black of its face a disease upon the senses made worse by the odour of decay wafting from its putrid body. “With you and all your friends,” it added slyly, a glance past Marcus to Tessa.

His composure vanished at the specific threat to Tessa, and unleashing the reins on his tight control, Marcus unloaded his will onto the creature, forcing its form in upon itself until nothing remained but a ragged cry of pain as it finally imploded.

The room now empty of evil, Marcus turned to see Tessa staring at him with shock and awe.

“What the hell were *they*?” she asked, her eyes bright with fear. “And who the hell are *you*?”

Marcus sighed. “That’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time,” she said, her jaw clenched.

Loud footsteps echoed down the hall, and he realised they had little time before more outsiders became involved. “I’m sorry about this, Tessa.”

Giving her no time to respond, he mentally triggered her neck, momentarily interrupting the supply of oxygen to her brain just enough to make her lose consciousness, and gathered her in his arms before releasing a hurried spell.

His brother immediately appeared.

“We need to leave, Aerolus, now.”

Aerolus nodded, and reaching out to touch Marcus, teleported them from the office just as security breeched the door.

Chapter Four

“Am I dreaming, or is Marcus standing with a gorgeous though unconscious redhead in our living room?” Cadmus stared with disbelief.

“You’re not dreaming,” Aerolus said wryly.

“Of course I’m not dreaming.” Cadmus rolled his eyes. “That was a rhetorical question. Honestly, Aerolus, you need a sense of humour.” He turned to Marcus. “So, bro, tell me you found her for me, an early birthday gift, maybe?”

Irritated by the familiar amusement curling Cadmus’ mouth, Marcus scowled and shifted Tessa closer in his arms. “I don’t think a wraith attack is all that funny, Cadmus.”

“Nor do I.” Aerolus shook his head and studied Tessa with an intensity Marcus found bothersome. “But this feels like more than a simple attack.”

Much as Marcus wanted to hear Aerolus’ thoughts, his first concern was for Tessa. “Fill me in later. I’m putting her to bed.”

“Attaboy,” Cadmus said with a smirk before stumbling over his feet with the help of a heavy wind. He turned to glare at Aerolus. “What the hell was that for?”

“Do I really have to explain it to you?” Aerolus sighed and nodded to Marcus. “Stay with Tessa. We won’t know how safe she is until I have a brief talk with Arim. Cadmus, stay sharp.”

A heartbeat later, Aerolus vanished.

“I was just kidding,” Cadmus grumbled. “I’ll be down here the rest of the night, keeping watch. Let me know if you need anything,” he added in a serious voice.

“Thanks.” Marcus carried Tessa from the living room to his bedroom on the third floor.

Once inside, he laid her gently on the bed and shut the door, giving them some privacy. In the safety of his room, he took stock of what had almost happened, and his heart rate refused to slow.

Tessa could have been harmed, was all he could think. In his agitation, he paced the room, wondering what he should do to prevent Tessa from a future wraith encounter. As he paced, his glance returned time and time again to her motionless frame.

She looked so damned beautiful lying there. So still, she afforded him his first opportunity to study the stubborn woman without the threat of reprisal.

In sleep, she looked serene, soft even. Her golden skin shone under the bright light keeping the night at bay, and he readily admitted how much he wanted her. Auburn tresses framed a strong

yet feminine face full of promise, full of passion. But her mouth...full lips begged a second taste, and upon seeing them, he immediately recalled how supple and inviting they'd felt under his mouth.

His body stirred, and though he knew now was not the time for fantasies, he couldn't help himself. He paused in his pacing and sat next to her on the bed, tracing the line of her petal-soft cheekbone.

She had such strength. For the past six months he'd tried very hard not to notice the assertive redhead with the autocratic mouth made for sin. She demanded the very best of herself and her peers, and never talked down to anyone. It was with some surprise that he'd realised she deliberately avoided him, but considering the fierce attraction he'd been unable to shake, he figured her instincts had served them both well.

Yet working so closely with her this past month, he couldn't help wondering what it was she found so offensive about him. He had no complaints about her, except for her recent penchant for breaking into his office. Pondering his possible deficiencies, his mood soured.

A woman like Tessa Sheridan walked like she owned the world, and she very well did. She had a successful career, friends and a close family—her brother had sent her flowers on her birthday that had put a smile on her face for days. She could have any man she wanted with the snap of her fingers, and she walked with an air of confidence that made one take a second look. She had it all. Perhaps she'd sensed that same assurance lacking in him, that 'perfect' quality he'd been missing for most of his life.

Though others saw what he wanted them to see, he had the uneasy feeling Tessa sensed the truth of his character. *Yeah, and mauling her over my desk the other day must have really put me over the top.* He grimaced in remembrance.

"Marcus?" She groaned and opened her eyes, capturing his attention.

"Tessa? How do you feel?" He stroked her hair, unconsciously seeking a measure of the closeness he feared he'd destroyed after whisking her from the office.

"A bit hazy." She rolled her head back and forth on his pillow, her hair spreading like a silken curtain across his sheets. The image made his blood surge, and his hunger for her grew.

Suddenly she stopped moving her head and blinked up at him, her bright blue eyes narrowed with accusation. "You knocked me out. Right after you killed that, that *thing*, you did something to me." She fingered her clothes, eyeing him suspiciously.

He refrained from rolling his eyes and sighed instead. "I did nothing more than take you away from a dangerous situation. I most assuredly did not take advantage of you." Unable to resist, he leaned

closer and murmured softly, "When I do, you'll know it."

She blushed becomingly and bit her lip, then frowned slightly, and he could almost see her reliving their battle with the *Netharat*. But instead of asking him questions, she thanked him.

"For what?" he couldn't help but ask. It was his fault the *Netharat* had endangered her in the first place.

"You saved me," she said simply. "They would have killed me if you hadn't put yourself between me and them." She swallowed hard at the memory but quickly regained her composure and narrowed her eyes. "But about your little threat to 'take advantage' of me," she paused. Instead of leaning away or scowling at him, she pulled him close and shocked the hell out of him by brushing his mouth with hers. "Promises, promises."

Tessa tried to tell herself she suffered from a head injury, or perhaps the aftereffects of dealing with those nightmarish creatures. But the powerful attraction she'd been feeling since setting eyes on Marcus Storm had finally come to a head.

She knew without asking that she lay on his bed, in his room. She could smell him on the sheets, a masculine blend of sexuality and spice she couldn't resist anymore. And the way he stared down at her, his expression cocky yet tender, his eyes dark with erotic suggestion, it was just too much to take.

Well, she was done waiting around for him to make a move. He'd done that once and left her high and dry. It was time for Tessa to take the lead.

Their lips met and thoughts of control faded. His mouth tasted like forbidden fruit. Sweet and addicting and more than dangerous. Flashes of his protectiveness in the office, of how he'd moved to save her life hit her, and she deepened the kiss, as much in thanks as in awe of his raw power.

Finally, she'd met a man as strong, if not stronger, than herself. The knowledge was almost as powerful an aphrodisiac as his touch.

She groaned under the sensual onslaught of his mouth and stroking hands. As if she'd unleashed a tidal wave of pure sensual aggression, the 'gentlemanly' Marcus plundered her mouth, conquering any resistance she might have tried to find.

"More," she said breathlessly when his lips left her mouth for her ear, running her hands through his thick black hair. She loved that he kept his hair a tad longer than was fashionable, and rubbed the silky strands as he nipped at her earlobe.

He shifted over her, trapping her beneath his massive strength. Then his hands stole under her shirt and cupped her breasts through her bra, moulding them to his warm touch. She arched into him, duly

aroused when she heard his groan of appreciation.

"Yes, *sertia*, like that," he said thickly, before plunging his tongue in her ear.

She almost shot off the bed, but his large hands held her down, hungrily stroking her breasts, teasing the nipples into hard points. All the while she felt the heat of his large body atop hers, felt the hard contours of muscle and arousal.

His erection burned against her belly, and she pressed up against him, urging him for more.

He kissed his way down her neck and lingered at her pulse point, leaving stinging bites of desire in his wake.

Just as she was about to tear his clothes off, he stopped and leaned over her.

"This is your last chance," he said, panting heavily. "Yes or no," he fairly growled, his blue eyes so dark they looked black, swirling seas of desire and need.

"Yes," she whispered and gasped.

With a speed she wouldn't have believed had she not seen it, he whipped off her clothing and stood staring down at what he'd revealed. She couldn't help noticing the large bulge in his trousers and ached to see his flesh bare.

He noted her gaze and smiled, a charmer's grin of seduction that looked dangerously sincere. And she knew if she wasn't careful, she could completely fall for this man, as countless others had. Without missing a step, Marcus peeled off first his shirt, then his shoes, socks and trousers. And stood before her naked.

Her eyes widened, aware he was huge and more than aroused. "No underwear?"

"Too constricting."

I'll say. She licked her lips and he focused on the movement like a predator seeking prey. A hint of nerves flared—she was finally going to get the man she'd been lusting after for months. She could only hope she'd measure up.

"You are so damned beautiful," he rasped and descended slowly, crouching down on the bed until he knelt between her legs. He spread her thighs wide, and she grew wetter seeing his intent gaze.

"You don't have to—" She lost all thought when his mouth covered her sex and his tongue shot forth, tracing her labia and finding her clit with ease.

He licked and stroked until she was completely wet and moaning, her hands twisted in the bed. If he didn't slow down, she was going to come and come hard. She had never been so turned on in her life. She tried to squirm away from his touch, to ease the sensation when his hands trapped her thighs, holding her still.

"No," he ordered roughly, and she glanced down her body to see his eyes glittering with barely suppressed need. "Take it, Tessa, take what I can give you."

She opened her mouth to reply when his mouth found her once again. This time he added a large finger, plunging it inside her wet sheath as he clamped his mouth over her clit.

She gasped his name and arched into his kiss, her hips following his lead, unable to stop the need for more. "Please, Marcus, please," she cried as her climax sailed closer.

His finger quickened, plunging deeper and harder as his mouth did the same. He nipped at her clit and thrust a second digit into her and she saw stars. Crying out his name, she shuddered and spasmed, her body raining pleasure, a deluge of rapture so intense she felt every beat of her heart as it thundered within her breast.

Before she could calm down, he was over her and in her, and the feel of his massive cock flared her frazzled nerve endings, rekindling her desire with a startling rush.

He said something lyrical as he thrust inside her, his shaft growing harder and larger as he pummelled. She was slick, accommodating him easily, yet she still felt stretched. Not painfully so, but her womb felt full, completely gloving him.

"Tessa, yes," he said in a guttural voice, nearing fulfilment.

Another few thrusts and Tessa came again, the lighting speed of her climax stunning her into a breathless gasp.

He rode her hard, and his chest continued to brush her sensitive nipples, driving her further into mindless ecstasy.

Then suddenly he stiffened, and she actually felt him convulse inside her. On and on he tensed as he shot into her, moaning her name feverishly.

Trying to regain her breath, she felt completely astounded at the absolute, out of this world rapture she'd experienced not once, but twice and both occurrences within moments of one another. Blinking hard, she stared into the taut face above her, entranced at the passion lining Marcus' cobalt eyes, half-closed and sleepy with pleasure.

He grinned down at her, a heart-stopping smile that made her toes curl. "I knew you'd be good, but you damn near killed me."

She blushed and couldn't help smiling back. He made her feel so good, so special. Warmth surged in his voice, affection and something magical swimming in his gaze. Here was a seducer who could easily conquer anyone with a pulse. *And regularly did.* The thought took away some of her afterglow, but as if he could sense her troubled thoughts, he shook his head and leaned down to kiss her tenderly.

"No more worries for tonight, Tessa. Let's enjoy the peace of safety and being together. There's time enough for trouble tomorrow."

He chanced a look at his alarm clock and groaned. "Or should I say, later today?"

She yawned, her body in complete agreement. "Good point." Regrets could wait. Tonight she would bask in pure sexual satisfaction. Before she could ask where he wanted her to sleep, he withdrew from her body and lay down beside her. He smoothly shifted her onto her side and spooned her with his large frame.

They fit like two perfect pieces to a puzzle, she thought drowsily and yawned again. "We fit," she murmured and snuggled back into his warmth.

"Just like a lock and key," he whispered and kissed her neck.

She had just begun to drift off and thought he'd done the same, when he pulled her closer and nuzzled her ear. "Hmm," he breathed, and she relaxed when he murmured something else, something she instinctively knew was important. As her mind wandered into dream, she promised herself to ask him about it when they woke.

Marcus moved closer to the source of softness cushioning his growing erection. He'd been having the most erotic dream about Tessa, only to wake and find her still in his bed. He inhaled the sexy scent of perfume and woman at the crook of her neck and wrapped a strand of silken, auburn hair around his finger.

She murmured softly in her sleep and wriggled closer. He closed his eyes again, relishing the feel of her naked flesh. She was so damned gorgeous, so sensual. And all his—at least for the time being, he hastily reminded himself.

He should have been satisfied from their loving earlier, but he couldn't seem to get enough of Tessa Sheridan. Not bothering to dwell on his fascination, he decided only a fool would ignore what Tessa offered, even innocently in sleep.

Shifting his hand from her hip, he traced the sleek contour of her belly, arousing himself further by rubbing his heavy cock between her soft cheeks. She murmured and stretched, taunting him with subtle approval.

Wanting to experience it all, he opened his eyes and watched the light of day caress Tessa's honeyed skin. Such creamy purity on a woman with enough sexuality to bespell a prince, he thought wryly, moving his hand towards the apex of her thighs.

Ah, but such magic. She was already moist and needy. He fingered her ripe clit, full and begging for pleasure. And as he touched her, he spread her thighs wider and repositioned his cock between her legs.

He found this position on his side a tad awkward, but definitely interesting. As he angled her leg over his, widening her entry, he sensed her gradual awareness.

“Marcus?” she asked in a throaty voice. “What are you doing?”

He pushed slowly inside her, sliding through the slick, narrow walls of her sex and found perfection. “I’m waiting for you to cry out when you come.” He began pistoning, pulling her hips back to meet his controlled thrusts. “You’re so wet, Tessa,” he rasped, tightening his hands on her hips.

“And you’re so hard,” she said huskily, reaching behind her to fondle his ass.

Her fingers amplified his lust, making the urge to come swell uncomfortably *near*.

Reaching around her, he fondled her clit, thumbing her until she jolted against him, out of control and breathing hard.

“Marcus,” she moaned and drenched him with a flood of desire.

Her clenching pussy pulled him deeper, until he too felt the stirrings of orgasm. An invisible push sent his cock deeper into her, and he couldn’t delay it any longer. With a grateful groan, he sank into her heat and emptied himself, pulsing with the beat of her heart. She continued to contract, stimulating him so that he literally saw stars as he came.

When next he could function, he kissed Tessa softly on the shoulder. She shivered and he chuckled. “You are so sexy,” he murmured, unable to stop touching her. He remained within her, not yet willing to part from her liquid warmth.

She tightened her walls around him and he sighed with regret, not wanting to face the world waiting for them. He’d much rather make love to Tessa through tomorrow.

“We have to get up,” he apologised as he withdrew and left the bed. Coming around to face her, he noted her flushed cheeks and heavy-lidded eyes, and something in his heart gave.

Startled, he took a step forward and looked harder, as if to see what it was about her that was so different from the other women he’d met.

“Marcus?” she asked, blinking up at him. “Something wrong?”

“Only that I’m leaving you naked in bed, alone,” he muttered. “I’ll go shower, unless you want to go first?”

She shook her head and he grimaced.

She laughed. “Age before beauty, I always say.”

“Intelligent, sexy *and* funny. There’s no end to your many talents is there?” A towel suddenly shot out of the bathroom and smacked him in the head.

“You forgot unmanageable,” she quipped, and he rolled his eyes at her grin before turning to the bathroom with the wayward towel.

Tessa couldn’t help her own sigh as she snuggled into his soft,

satin sheets. *Trust Marcus to sleep in luxury*, she thought with a huge grin. Much as she wanted to lament her decision to sleep with him, she couldn't, in all honesty, regret exploring the chemistry between them.

She had never, in her entire life, felt such extreme pleasure from another's touch. And despite his reputation, she had a feeling that for Marcus it was the same. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she could almost sense a hint of unease in 'Cool Blue', a fact contrary to everything she knew about the arrogant, larger-than-life playboy.

Her face flamed. 'Larger-than-life' definitely applied to his physique. Whew! Both the size of his ship *and* the motion in his ocean scored a perfect ten.

A small laugh left her when she thought about how scattered her normally organised life had become. She'd given in to her desires and slept with Marcus Storm, the office bad boy, and didn't feel the slightest bit guilty about it. Not to mention she'd seen true evil, been face to face with it, and right now couldn't care less.

A hazy sense of disquiet tried to pass but couldn't penetrate the sexual fulfilment encasing her from head to toe. Who knew hot sex could feel so liberating?

Suddenly aware that the shower had stopped some time ago, Tessa pushed the covers down to her hip, leant on her elbow and glanced towards the partially closed bathroom door, hoping for another glimpse of Marcus' mouthwatering nudity.

"Hello there," he said in a deep voice, full of male speculation, *from the other side of the room*.

Startled since she hadn't seen him exit the bathroom and dress, she took a moment to get her breath back and rolled to face him. He wore strange clothes, a scarlet-belted overshirt over black silk trousers tucked into black boots.

She grinned, pleased when his eyes settled over her breasts. "Like what you see?"

"You have no idea," he murmured, his eyes flashing from silver to black in a heartbeat.

She licked her lips and saw him swallow. Excitement flared. Maybe they could postpone returning to the world a little longer. Yet, the longer she looked at him, the more something bothered her about his reaction. He seemed aroused, but at the same time, different?

"What's with your eyes?" she asked, noticing the discrepancy for the first time. Maybe the whole magic slash sex thing had turned his eyes from blue to grey. Hell, she'd seen stranger things in her lifetime. "I thought they were blue."

"They are," came an extremely annoyed voice from behind her.

Chapter Five

“Sorry,” preceded a soft whisper of sound as Aerolus teleported from the room.

“It’s about time you returned. What did Arim have to say?” Cadmus badgered as Aerolus met him in the living room.

Still trying to calm his surging hormones, Aerolus thought it best not to say anything about what he’d just seen. All he needed was Cadmus teasing him about Marcus’ woman in front of Marcus to start a full-out war.

Their now-absent brother, Darius, the resident firewalker, had a short temper, the Royal Four’s renowned hothead—literally. But at least with Darius you knew to avoid the fireball sure to come your way.

With Marcus, retaliation might not come for days or even weeks. Cool and self-possessed, the River Prince’s cutting arrogance would not allow him to fly off the handle. No, Marcus preferred guerrilla tactics that would do the Djinn proud.

Aerolus shook his head, not wanting to deal with an internal problem when he had so many other issues to worry about.

“Hello, Aerolus?” Cadmus snapped his fingers. “I think you need to lay off the sorcery for a while, windboy. Your brain’s been fried.”

Cadmus had a real knack for picking up local idioms. Unfortunately, he also had a knack for causing undue aggravation.

“I’ll tell you about Arim as soon as Marcus comes down.”

Cadmus grinned. “Speaking of Marcus, I believe he and that gorgeous redhead are well on their way to creating a new Royal Four. I was going to bring them something to eat earlier when I got the distinct impression not to disturb.”

“Really?” Aerolus tried to sound disinterested, but he could feel his face heating. Images of the woman’s lush breasts and sultry features stirred uncomfortable longings he’d been suppressing since he’d taken this new path to sorcery.

“Really,” Cadmus said, sounding as if he’d swallowed a laugh. “So it probably wasn’t a good idea to barge in on them the way you did.”

Shit.

“So what can you tell me?” Cadmus sounded more than interested, and his brown eyes sparkled with mirth. “Is she even half as hot naked as I think she is?”

“Yes, Aerolus, what can you tell us?” Marcus asked in a stiff voice as he left the hallway and entered the living room.

Aerolus took a deep breath and turned to face his brother. Icy blue eyes fairly begged him to give the wrong answer. Despite Marcus’

infallible control, he seemed to be hanging on a precipice of rage.

Not good.

Shrugging and holding his hands up to protest his innocence, Aerolus spoke calmly, not needing any more headaches today. Arim's news was more than enough to make everyone's week sour. He didn't need Marcus adding to the misery.

"All I can say is, I'm sorry. I had no idea she would be sleeping in your room, let alone wearing..." he paused and looked back to see Cadmus hanging on every word. Aerolus frowned, a small hint of emotion he normally kept in check, but Cadmus' grin only widened. "Suffice it to say I apologise, wholeheartedly. I would never intentionally intrude on your privacy," he added in a softer voice.

Thankfully, Marcus accepted his explanation as truth, for his hardened expression evened into one of familiar arrogance. "I shouldn't have jumped to the wrong conclusion." They both ignored Cadmus' disappointed mutterings. "Had you been anyone else," Marcus paused and pointedly looked to Cadmus, "I wouldn't have believed you."

"Well, thanks for small favours." Cadmus huffed and shot Aerolus a pitying glance. "Unlike Saint Aerolus, I have a libido that reacts to a woman like that." He whistled and looked beyond Marcus. "And speaking of Lady Fine..."

Tessa Sheridan entered the room with eyes as round as saucers. She stared from Marcus to Cadmus to Aerolus, then focused again on Marcus.

"You did tell her you had identical brothers, right?" Cadmus asked innocently, for which he received an icy glare.

"I didn't have time to mention it before Aerolus burst in this morning," Marcus said between clenched teeth,

And caught an eyeful, Aerolus mentally added. He could only be thankful that unlike Darius, Marcus couldn't read minds.

Tessa stared suspiciously from brother to brother, and Aerolus felt simultaneous pity for her obvious shock and curiosity at how she would handle this new information. Darius' wife had handled the news of four identical brothers in stride, a definite indicator of her potential as his *affai*. Would Tessa accept the Royal Four and their current predicament so calmly? Could Marcus be so lucky?

He glanced at Marcus and saw his brother trying to appear calm as he awaited Tessa's reaction. But his clenched fists clearly indicated nervous anticipation. Well, Aerolus thought and inwardly smiled. The coolest of the bunch had finally met his match. Aerolus only wished he knew how long it would take the River Prince to recognise he'd fallen.

Tessa stared at three—not one, but *three*—carbon copies of the sexiest man she'd ever seen in her life. Amazingly, they all possessed the exact same haircut, same facial features and same height, but not the same eyes. Marcus' were a clear, ocean blue, whereas the one who'd seen her earlier had silver eyes, and the grinning one on the couch possessed light brown, laughing eyes.

She was glad one of them found the situation amusing.

"Anything else you'd like to tell me? Are there any more of you I should know about?" She tried to appear nonchalant, as if she always made hot, passionate love with one of several clones after slaying demon spawn at the office.

Marcus sighed and the brown-eyed copy laughed openly. "Actually, yes. There's one more of us, our brother Darius, but he's not here." She stared at him in amazement and he quickly continued. "I'm sorry, Tessa. I was just coming back to explain our situation when you walked in." He took a breath and calmly introduced the others, as if one of his brothers hadn't already seen too much of her earlier.

"We've met," Aerolus said blandly and grasped her hand in his large palms. She could practically feel Marcus' tension rise until Aerolus nodded respectfully and took a step back, safely out of reach.

Had Cool Blue just shown some jealousy? Intriguing thought. She gave him a surreptitious study before nodding towards the remaining brother, Cadmus. Darius, Aerolus, Cadmus—geez, was Marcus the only one with a normal name?

"What an absolute pleasure to meet you," Cadmus said smoothly, lifting her hand to his hot mouth. He placed a chaste kiss against the back of her hand that warmed, but in no way made her feel what Marcus had.

Marcus' eyes darkened and narrowed, and suddenly Cadmus stumbled back several paces to tumble over the couch.

"Dammit, Marcus, I'm not the one who saw her naked!"

Aerolus rubbed his forehead as a flush of red bronzed his cheekbones. "You have as much tact as a *freznalian* bull," he murmured and shook his head. "I'm sorry for any duress I may have caused earlier," he said to her in a soft, deep voice. "I clearly had no idea my brother had company when I arrived."

Tessa nodded, accepting his apology even as it stirred new questions. "About that arrival—"

"Tessa, you'd better sit down," Marcus deliberately interrupted and led her to the couch. "There's a lot to explain and no way to do it gently."

"I'm not china, Marcus," she said firmly. "I won't break. And with what you know about me, I don't think my accepting the unusual will be that difficult, do you?"

Cadmus and Aerolus watched the interplay with interest.

“What does she mean?” Cadmus asked, nearing her before Marcus forcibly thrust him further down the couch. “By the Light, Marcus, I wasn’t trying to seduce her with a kiss to the hand.” He sounded exasperated but he turned to Tessa with a wink. “It didn’t work, did it?”

She couldn’t help sharing his grin. His playful antics relieved some of her stress, but apparently did little to ease Marcus’ worries. He placed a protective—or was that possessive?—arm around her and remained stoic under his brothers’ regard.

Aerolus raised one brow, an eerie likeness of the Marcus she knew at the office. But he didn’t comment on the arm, or on Marcus’ aggressive stance.

Again she studied the men surrounding her before conceding with a sigh. As much as she wanted to stand around and stare at three gorgeous men, she couldn’t ignore what had happened last night. She needed answers, some way to make sense of the unreal creatures they had fought, as well as the near-perfect lovemaking she’d experienced with the office bad boy who was way more than what he seemed.

Her gaze unwillingly sought Marcus and her entire body throbbed at the challenge in his turbulent gaze.

She cleared her throat, determined to focus, and stepped away from him. “I think it goes without saying I want some answers. This has been the strangest weekend of my life. And trust me, I know strange.”

“Explain strange,” Marcus said. “What was that vague explanation you made in my office? How is your ability to move things with your mind my fault?”

Aware of the intense watchfulness in the room, Tessa began pacing, struck with a sudden burst of nerves. No one outside her family knew of her abilities. She’d never trusted anyone enough to share her secret. Yet as she studied Marcus and his brothers, she knew they had more to hide than she did.

“My family has been steeped in the paranormal since the early 1800s, when my great-great-great-grandmother was run out of town for practicing ‘the dark arts’.”

Marcus and Cadmus looked confused before Aerolus murmured, “Sorcery.”

She nodded. “Sorcery, witchcraft, it all boils down to magic of the mind if you ask me. In any case, my entire family has flashes of insight and mental abilities that would make most people uncomfortable if they knew. We keep it quiet and live our lives as best we can. Unfortunately, we don’t always see what’s right in front of us.” Her thoughts strayed to the untimely death of her parents ten

years ago.

"We're not supposed to," Cadmus said. "Some things are meant to happen without our interference."

She blinked and stared at Cadmus, surprised at his insightful observation. "That's what I told my brother Tom. He's the one in the family with a gift for precognition."

"Cadmus also possesses the ability to foretell the future," Marcus said.

"And what about you?" she asked. "What exactly can you do besides move things with your mind and drown people in the middle of a dry room?"

Silence settled over the room until Aerolus sighed. "You might as well tell her all, Marcus. It's not as if she hasn't seen you use your elemental powers."

"Elemental powers?"

"I, we," Marcus corrected, nodding to his brothers, "are the last remaining Storm Lords, along with our brother Darius. We are the Royal Four, identical princes with the powers of the elements."

Storm Lords? Princes? That explained the arrogance, she thought as she stared at him, dying to know more.

"We come from a parallel world called Tanselm, a land that, as we speak, is under siege from evil, from the creatures you met last night, and worse."

"Of course you are. Good versus evil, magic powers, royal princes, this just keeps getting better." She couldn't help but laugh. Despite the absurdity of his story, she believed him. She'd seen evil up close, had witnessed Marcus' awesome victory over the creatures. And her gift for telepathy notwithstanding—

"Ow! Dammit, where did that come from?" Cadmus scowled at the coffee cup that had smacked him in the side of the head. "Watch it, Marcus."

Marcus' lips curled. "That wasn't me."

Three pair of eyes trained on her.

She shrugged defensively, embarrassed. "It's not my fault. It's his." At Marcus' impatient sigh, she explained. "I call it my ability to siphon. Since as far back as I can remember, people with strong extrasensory gifts affect me. Without knowing how I do it, I, well, I siphon their abilities.

"Friday night I scared myself silly by moving a bottle of water with my mind. I didn't think about it. I was thirsty, and the bottle flew towards my hand. I knew someone I'd come into contact with had to be gifted with telekinesis. I just never thought it would be Marcus Storm," she ended wryly.

"Why not?" Aerolus asked, interest glittering in his eyes.

“Because he’s so, I don’t know, Lord of the Manner-ish. He seems too proper to do anything out of the ordinary. I mean, at work everybody loves him. The men think he’s in line to become the next head executive, the women all want to bear his young,” she said sarcastically, aware she now had to add herself to this category, though she’d die before admitting it to him. “He just seems incapable of doing anything wrong.” She stared at Marcus, amusement lacing her frustration when he arched a brow at her. “See? Even when he’s annoyed he goes about it elegantly.”

Aerolus’ lips curled slightly and Cadmus laughed. “Yeah, Marcus, I told you you had a stick up your ass. Even Tessa noticed it.”

“Anyway,” she cut in hurriedly when Marcus’ eyes darkened to a dangerous blue-black, “imagine my surprise to find that Marcus was the source of my newfound power. I even controlled a bit of it against those creatures we fought.”

“Yes, you did,” Marcus replied tightly. “I was reluctantly impressed that you had the gall to fight the *Netharat*, considering how strange and frightening they must have seemed.” She opened her mouth to refute him, but he held up a hand to ward her off. “*Frightening* is not an insult, Tessa. Grown spellcasters fear the wraiths.”

“He’s right,” Cadmus agreed. “That you two survived a surprise attack is a blessing. How many were there?”

Marcus described the attack, and Tessa relived it along with him. Once he finished, several pending questions she’d had swam to mind.

“Explain to me how you drowned those wraiths. You said you were a Storm Lord?” The more she heard about him, the more she needed to know. Fascinating didn’t begin to describe Marcus. The hot sex was incredible, but finding someone with an odder past than her own was worth its weight in gold.

“Storm Lords possess elemental magic, an ability to command the elements. For example, I control water.” Marcus cupped his hand and held it out to her. She dipped her finger in and felt a tingle race through her where water lapped the digit. “Water responds to my call, from a well inside of me. I command it whenever the need arises.”

“I control the earth,” Cadmus added, his mood quiet, clearly indicating his respect for the discussion. He held out a hand and she felt a ripple of, well, something, nearing her. “Normally I cause shocks in the earth, in rock, anything to do with the land. But lately I’ve been experimenting with the gravitational forces intrinsic to the earth. Did you know how much potential energy is just waiting to be tapped? If I curl my mind around it just so, I can—”

“Cadmus, we get the picture,” Marcus drawled. “We don’t need a science lesson.” He continued. “Darius, our absent brother, controls

fire. And as you can see, Aerolus summons the winds.”

She watched in awe as Aerolus channelled air, waving it past her and around her in lapping touches of wind as he flexed his hand.

“Amazing,” she said, thrilled at their gifts. While hers hadn’t been an easy life, she’d never taken her talents for granted, or failed to appreciate her extraordinary abilities. She could truly value what the Storm Lords could do. “So does that tie into your telepathy?” she asked Marcus.

“Actually, that’s something else entirely. A gift from my mother’s people,” Marcus said.

“Since arriving in your world, we are each discovering the fulfilment of our latent abilities,” Aerolus added.

Your world. Her euphoria at finding kindred spirits, people who would understand what it meant to be different, faded. Though Marcus could equate with her abilities, he was completely out of her league. She could deal with the whole royalty angle—hell, she considered herself the queen of weird—but she couldn’t compete with *another world*. She ignored the wrenching emptiness that suddenly yawned before her.

“Then you all have different abilities?” Tessa clutched at the new thought, anything to distract her from an unwelcome attachment to Marcus. As if he sensed her withdrawal, he narrowed his gaze on her and she hurriedly continued. “I’m just wondering if I’ll be able to pick up on them, like I did Marcus.”

“Can you focus on an individual and deliberately pull his or her powers?” Aerolus seemed to ponder something. “Try me.”

“And what is it you do, exactly?” she hedged, not as comfortable with Aerolus as she was with the others. Despite the fact he’d seen her half naked, which she was still coming to grips with, Aerolus seemed more intent, somehow set apart from his brothers.

“Just try it, Tessa,” he said, his calm soothing.

“I’m not sure—” Marcus began, when Tessa interrupted.

“Okay, but control has never worked for me in the past.”

She closed her eyes and looked inward, focusing on her inner self. As she did, she sent out a piece of her being, a tendril of thought to grasp at Aerolus. Something clicked and she felt heavy, as if a sudden weight pulled her down.

“Now think hard about Marcus’ bed, envision it in your mind. Don’t question it, just do it,” Aerolus said, as if from a great distance.

The minute she did, her body and mind snapped free of Aerolus. She felt a large pressure squeezing, making it hard to breathe. Everything grew dark, a flash of light caused her to blink, and then... *whamo*. She stared in astonishment at Marcus’ bedroom.

Footsteps sounded and the door burst open. Marcus and his

brothers entered quickly.

“Excellent, Tessa,” Aerolus said with a wide grin. Caught off guard by his enthusiasm, she smiled, trying to catch her breath. Her heart was still racing from the odd experience of being ‘squeezed’ between places, and she was sure she had more questions if she only knew where to start asking.

“Nice going.” Cadmus gave her a thumbs up.

When she turned to Marcus, however, he wasn’t smiling. In fact, his eyes were downright icy. The look made her blood hum, her nervous excitement churning into anger.

“That was foolish,” he said coolly. “I’m surprised you didn’t land on the other side of the state.”

“Oh really, prince charming?” she asked sarcastically, still unnerved by what she’d done. She didn’t need his help wondering what might have gone wrong. “Want to show me how to do it better?”

“I don’t teleport.” He enunciated each word and closed the distance between them. “And neither do you. You’re merely borrowing Aerolus’ talent. Don’t forget it.”

Gone was the lover who’d sensually fulfilled her every desire. Marcus Storm, Cool Blue, had returned with a vengeance—the golden boy from the office trying to remind her of her ‘place’. It shouldn’t have surprised her, but it hurt to feel betrayed by the return of his distant personality.

Did the smug bastard have to sound so degrading? At least if they’d been alone she might have handled it better. But he’d insulted her in front of his stunned brothers, and she could feel her temper spiking exponentially. *Mess with a redhead, feel the burn.*

“You know, Marcus, you might be hot shit at the office, but having met your brothers, I can see you’re not as special as you like to think. To me, you’re just a...” she paused as energy slithered over her.

“Pray continue.” Marcus folded his arms over his chest and watched her with icy rage. “I’m dying to know what you *really* think.”

She grappled with the foreign sensations running through her. “Don’t you feel it?”

“Feel what? Foolish for allowing this trite conversation? I shouldn’t have allowed this to go as far as it has,” he murmured as if to himself.

He rambled something else but the energy surrounding her made it hard to hear.

“Tessa.” She saw Cadmus mouth her name. “Don’t worry, it’s only —”

“Get down,” she yelled at Tomanna’s golden boy, her once-in-a-lifetime lover. Mentally shoving him to the floor, she teleported instantaneously to the dark plane coalescing to solid form and

psychically attacked with all her will.

Chapter Six

“By the Light’s own heart,” Aerolus said in awe. “She’s attacking Arim.”

Marcus pushed himself to his feet in time to see Tessa attacking Arim’s still-materializing shape. And she was doing a decent job of it. The wily sorcerer couldn’t fight as effectively between states, for which Marcus was at this moment eternally grateful. He had no doubt were Arim at his best, Tessa would now be dead.

As it was, Marcus raced between Tessa and Arim, shielding her with his body and forcing her to back away with his mind.

“It’s okay, Tessa,” he repeated. “Arim’s a friend.”

Her efforts slowed Arim’s materialization but did not hinder his eventual shift. Willing it to be enough, Marcus threw up a wall of water between them and Arim and enforced the shield with his mind. The blow, when it landed, shook him enough that his focus faltered and water drenched his entire room.

Fortunately, he had Tessa protected in his arms when he wavered and therefore intercepted Arim’s second strike with his body. Pain, the likes of which he hadn’t felt in years, fingered up his spine. Yet he refused to release Tessa until the danger had passed.

“Enough,” roared Arim in the wake of his brothers’ hasty explanations. “What’s going on? Marcus?”

The pain in Marcus’ back faded, replaced with a glowing warmth, and he finally felt free to ease his hold on Tessa, who by this time had gone strangely still.

“Arim, meet Tessa Sheridan,” Aerolus said calmly. “Marcus’ friend.”

Tessa squirmed suddenly, and Marcus reluctantly gave her some space, though he kept a protective arm around her waist.

Arim cocked his head, his dark eyes blazing with barely fettered power. “Have I you to thank for my welcome?” he asked dryly.

She blushed and looked from Arim to Marcus and his brothers. “I’m sorry, it’s just that the last time I saw something appear like that we were attacked by wraiths.”

Immediately, Arim’s eyes softened and he held out a hand to Tessa. “My apologies, then, Tessa Sheridan. I am Arim, and I mean you no harm.”

“Yeah, I get that, now.” She shook his hand and released it quickly to turn to Marcus. “I didn’t realise what you were doing when you came at me.” She stopped when he rid his bedroom of water and began picking up pieces of a shattered sculpture from the floor. “Marcus! Your back!”

Marcus had no idea what was bothering her now, so he wasn't prepared when she yanked him to her, violently. Scowling, he tried to turn but she held him in a mental grip so strong he knew she was unaware of her psychic thrall.

"Your clothes are shredded and your back is bright red. Are you alright? What happened? What can I do?" she asked in rapid succession.

"I'm fine," he said, and pushed through her will to face her. He couldn't help feeling gratified at her concern. She really had no idea how strong she grew when emotionally charged, but he could see the worry lining her beautiful blue eyes. "The minute Arim knew it was me, he eased the pain of the fire blast."

Her eyes widened and he cursed himself for his poor choice of words. She grabbed him by the shirt and tugged him around so that she could see his back again. The touch of her warm palm on his skin sent a shiver of sensual delight through him. He only hoped it didn't show.

When he glanced up at Arim and his brothers' knowing looks, he cursed.

"What? Did I hurt you?" Tessa asked innocently, stopping her stroking fingers mid-touch.

"No, I'm fine," he said through clenched teeth. He reached around and pulled Tessa to his side. "Now why don't we sit on the bed and catch up with Arim like normal people?"

Cadmus snorted. "Don't you mean, people pretending to be normal?" He whistled when Marcus and Tessa moved past him to the bed. "No wonder you were worried, Tessa. Now that I can see it, Marcus, your back looks like hell."

Aerolus reproved Cadmus, and while they argued, Marcus reassured Tessa he was indeed fine. Seeing how disturbed she was by his back, he decided to cover it up. Damn, all his clean clothes were downstairs in the laundry. Once again, Cadmus had slacked on his portion of the housework.

"I'll just be a minute while I change," he told her, sparing a scowl for Cadmus. "Don't move, and don't let anyone intimidate you." He glared at Arim warningly. Despite the sorcerer's powers, Marcus wouldn't tolerate any more threats in her direction, *from anyone*.

Arim arched a brow in question but said nothing.

"I'll be right back," Marcus promised and hurried out the door down a flight of stairs to the laundry.

As he tossed off the ruined shirt and grabbed a plain, grey sweater from atop the dryer, he couldn't help feeling absolutely useless. Once again he was late detecting a threat. Tessa had responded instinctively to a shift in the energy fields. Yet Marcus, who

knew better, casually accepted the disturbance assuming it was Arim.

What if Arim hadn't been the intruding source? What if instead 'Sin Garu had managed to find them and sent both the *Netharat* and the Djinn to counter the safety spells surrounding the house?

Marcus threw on the sweater, feeling like a total failure. How could he hope to protect a kingdom when he couldn't even protect a single woman? Twice now she'd come to *his* aid, instead of the other way around. Dejection settled heavily on his shoulders and he gazed bitterly at his reflection in the paned glass of the room's only window.

Royal Four, ha. More like Royal Three and a Mistake.

Lifting his chin, as he'd often seen his father do before addressing the masses, he called to the Beyond. "Father, I deeply regret my shortcomings, yet know I pledge above all else my life for our world. In this I will not fail."

He left before he could see an answering visage of the late King Faustus and the disappointment in his father's silver gaze. But instead of the overking's ghostly reflection, he missed the wavering image of sad frustration lingering over a once-great monarch and failing father.

"Very impressive," Arim murmured as he studied Tessa from the top of her head to her bare feet.

Nothing about the perusal was sexual, yet Tessa still had the feeling she'd been most thoroughly examined. Arim's gaze made her feel like a woman first and foremost. And damn, did every male from Tanselm have the ability to make a woman salivate?

Arim, the mightiest sorcerer in all the land, according to Cadmus' whispered side note, sat across from her on a leather recliner, just sitting and staring as if she were a school science project.

She stared back, startled to note that he looked at her with the same expression Marcus normally used at the office. A rosy blush settled over her face despite her attempt to appear unfazed by the powerful sorcerer, and she glared at him when a smile hinted at his hard lips.

"So you're a siphon," he said and nodded, as if the concept made perfect sense to him. He knew of her ability? It had a name? "Yes, I'm aware of the ability, rare though it is. And what an odd coincidence you knew its name."

She blinked. Had he just read her mind?

"Yes, I did. But as spellcasters consider it a trespass, I shall try to refrain from doing so again. Wouldn't want to get the River Prince in a tizzy."

His fathomless black eyes crinkled, and though he didn't outwardly grin, she knew he was laughing on the inside.

"River Prince?"

“Marcus,” he clarified. “Commander of the waters, bringer of life. He shall rule the south once he finds what he seeks.”

“And what would that be?”

“Marcus, glad you’re back,” Cadmus said loudly, interrupting the conversation. “Arim and Tessa were just getting acquainted.”

Arim turned his amusement towards Marcus, affording Tessa a chance to study him better. As she watched the dark-eyed sorcerer, she found it unnerving how much he reminded her of Marcus. Same piercing stare, same arrogant mannerisms, same aristocratic features and olive-hued skin. Incredibly, Arim stood a head taller than the Storm brothers. Yet it wasn’t his height so much as his presence that threatened.

“Arim,” Marcus said, breaking her introspection. She watched the two clench forearms in lieu of a handshake. Arim murmured about Darius and Samantha, presumably the missing brother and his wife.

She continued her perusal, staring at Marcus far more than she liked but unable to stop herself. Because she couldn’t stop staring at the blue-eyed jerk, she’d only half-heard his conversation when the word ‘*affai*’ perked her interest.

“What did you say?”

Arim looked over his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to exclude you, Tessa. I was merely informing Marcus and his brothers about Darius and his *affai*, Samantha.”

Samantha had married Darius, that Tessa knew. So Samantha was his wife, his love. His *affai*? But Marcus had called Tessa his *affai*. After making love, he’d hugged her close and nuzzled her cheek, whispering lovely words in that foreign, lyrical language. *Affai*...what did it mean?

Sweetheart, probably. Then what did *sertia* mean? She desperately wanted to ask, but the unnerving stares from the Storm brothers made her hesitate.

“Something on your mind, Tessa?” Aerolus asked casually and glanced at Marcus, who stared at her with a hunger in his eyes. Too bad that hunger hadn’t precluded his obnoxious attitude earlier.

What the hell? If her question made him uncomfortable, so be it. She was already uncomfortable after nearly blasting his friend with God-knew whose powers. “As a matter of fact,” she began slowly, her eyes fixed on Marcus’ too-calm face. “I was wondering if you could translate a few words for me.” Alarm replaced Marcus’ composed demeanour.

“Ask away,” Arim answered with dancing eyes.

“What does *sertia* mean?”

“*Sertia*?” Cadmus repeated with surprise. “It’s a compliment. Roughly translated, it means ‘comely lover’.” A dimple appeared on

his left cheek. "It's usually used in context with a woman, a very sexy, thoroughly entrancing woman," he murmured as he studied her with humoured, bedroom eyes.

Marcus frowned. "Relax, Cadmus," he bit with disdain. "I swear you're in heat."

Aerolus coughed to hide his amusement but Arim seemed glued to the byplay, his attention on Marcus an almost tangible thing.

"Comely lover? I'll bet you say that to all the girls." She smiled sweetly as Marcus narrowed his eyes. "Then what does *affai* mean? Sweetcakes? Honeybunch?" she teased, hoping to put an end to her buzzing curiosity about the matter.

"It means bride of the Royal Four," Aerolus said quietly.

"Which is what Samantha is to Darius," Marcus added after a beat.

"But that's what you called me," she blurted, astounded by the translation. She could have kicked herself for saying so when four pairs of powerful eyes settled on her, one in shock, two in surprised amusement, and one in extreme satisfaction.

"So you say the River Prince is taken with the fiery-haired female?"

The wraith nodded, fear oozing out of its every last pore. "Sin Garu was not happy, and had no compunction taking his displeasure out on those undeserving. "Truly, lord. I managed a glimpse of the River Prince protecting the female during the fight before you called me back, else I'd have stayed to save the others."

"Sin Garu stroked his thin lower lip, idly creasing the red flesh with a long, sharpened nail. The wraith couldn't stop staring in helpless fascination. Much like those they prayed upon, his master had the pure skin and perfect features of a powerful sorcerer.

Long, lustrous blond hair shone in the dim light of his chambers, vying for attention with the sparkling flame of candlelight in the corner. The wraith absently ran a claw over its lumpy skull.

"This is good news, Caeth," Garu murmured. "Very good." He smiled, a gift of sharp white teeth that put Caeth's blackened grin to shame. "I can almost forgive your brethrens' failed attempt on the first *affai*, the mate of that enraged fire breather." He pursed his lips. "A waste of anger on that one. She looked quite tasty, but what's done is done."

He sighed and ran his hands over the marble tabletop upon which his attention was concentrated. Caeth, gauging his master's mood, took a closer step and noted the vision swirling under his master's gaze. A small sheet of murky water lay pooled on the tabletop. And every now and again, a hint of candlelight illuminated the image of a

pale woman with lustrous red hair and bright blue eyes. Caeth thought she appeared tasty indeed, and salivated at the idea of biting into such tender flesh.

“Not until I’ve had my fill.” ‘Sin Garu read his thoughts easily, a soft note of apology making him seem a noble taskmaster, and not the evil feeder of souls Caeth knew him to be.

Again, Caeth was taken aback that a man so pure in looks and so calm in spirit could house such darkness. Never before had his kind encountered a man like ‘Sin Garu, and he still had trouble understanding exactly how the man had made his alliances.

Always hungry, wraiths categorized everything in terms of sustenance. One bite could paralyse their prey with pain, offering a tasty treat in terms of hot blood and bone, and the precious struggle to survive. Only the Djinn had the magical wherewithal to completely withstand a wraith bite. All other members of the sorcerer’s guild and non-gifted that lived in Tanselm fell prey to wraith toxins within mere moments of being bitten, survival dependent upon individual strength of the victim.

‘Sin Garu, however, had withstood several wraith bites and inflicted his own damage, ensuring he would be heard by the wraith king. Since then, wraiths were forced to abide his command. Four rulers in all, over a twenty-year period, had risen and fallen on ‘Sin Garu’s word.

Caeth stared with glowing worship. ‘Sin Garu had the beauty, the control and the power of a true dark leader. And since promoting Caeth to Liaison upon Mirego’s death a month earlier, the sorcerer could do no wrong in the wraith’s eyes.

‘Sin Garu turned from the table he watched and winked at Caeth. “I do love you so,” he promised and laid a gentle kiss on Caeth’s uneven forehead. “It’s as if you were created just for me.”

Caeth’s heartbeat jumped, and a new, altogether unpleasant hunger pestered. Sexual urges were uncomfortable and unwelcome, a ravenous desire that made the ache in his belly throb like an infection.

“That’s right, Caeth.” ‘Sin Garu laughed, a musical sound that made Caeth want to weep with joy. “You’ll soon sate your appetite. Find me our contact in the new world and bring the Djinn here to me with all haste. Our answers lie in the little schemer’s blood.”

Caeth nodded and bowed, and scurried off to do ‘Sin Garu’s bidding.

The sorcerer watched with slitted eyes, pleased with Mirego’s replacement. Fawning and the inability to think past a given order were worth far more than an intelligent lackey. Mirego had tried to lure Prince Darius’ mate and instead lost her to the Tetrarch, giving the Storm Lords another advantage they didn’t need. Caeth would not

make the same mistake.

No, this wraith was in too much awe and fear of the great 'Sin Garu. With a soft chuckle, he gathered his thoughts on the woman's face in the scrying stone.

Unlike the first royal *affai*, this one had not yet committed herself to her prince. He studied her picture, a stirring of lust surprising him into looking deeper. Dark auburn hair and bright blue eyes made him think of his mother's relatives on the southern portion of the island. And Tessa Sheridan's ability to draw on another's power was an invaluable piece of skill he could put to good use destroying the Storm Lords.

He smiled, a sincere expression of delight. Thoughts of ridding his world of the Storm Lords for good, of returning Tanselm to its rightful owners, made him want to shout with joy. For too long the true natives of Tanselm lived in the dark, scurrying like rats in festering filth. The *Netharat*, his personal creation, an army of wraiths, ice demons and the Shadren, had made a lasting impression on the conceited lords and ladies of Tanselm at their last meeting.

But he knew the royal usurpers needed more. They needed to learn what it felt like to live day in and day out in waste and decay, to experience life between the light, to know how it felt to be ripped of one's heritage and channelled into forgetfulness simply because you weren't born at the right time with the right brethren.

His temper simmered as he glared at an image of the River Prince's new lady. Tessa Sheridan. She would help him make the Storm Lords pay. This time, he wouldn't fail. Prince Marcus and the others would watch firsthand as their lands, and their supposed *affai*, fell to him, 'Sin Garu, last of the Nostren elite.

Chapter Seven

“Excuse me?” Marcus stared at Tessa as if she’d lost her mind.

“What I meant was,” she paused, knowing she’d said what she meant. But as her confusion turned to understanding, panic set in. Why had Marcus referred to her as his *affai*—his damned *bride*, and why the hell had she blurted something so personal in front of his brothers and Arim, for God’s sake?

“Yes?” Cadmus asked with a wide grin.

“Please, go on,” Arim encouraged. His face bore no expression but his eyes were dancing with merriment.

“I meant to say, Marcus mentioned Darius and Samantha’s tie earlier and I had wanted to ask him what ‘*affai*’ actually meant.”

“So now you know,” Aerolus said plainly.

“Yep, now I know.” Her stomach grumbled, and she wished she had a piece of food stuffed in her mouth so she wouldn’t have to talk anymore.

A few seconds later a banana flew through the door nearly taking Cadmus’ ear off before landing in her hands. She flushed and hurriedly peeled the fruit, shoving it into her mouth, so as to make conversation impossible.

“If you’ll excuse us?” Marcus said to the others as he grabbed her by the arm quite forcefully. “We have some business matters to discuss.”

Tessa stared at him in confusion with a banana stuffed in her cheek, making her feel like a squirrel.

“The threat to have you fired,” Marcus reminded as she watched the others leave his room ever so slowly.

The minute the door closed, leaving the two of them alone, Marcus dropped her arm like a hot poker. He turned to her with a chilly frown. But as he stared at her, a genuine smile worked its way across his face. Then suddenly he was laughing, great loud chuckles straight from his gut.

Entranced, she soon grew annoyed as it became apparent she was the source of his amusement.

“Care to share?” she asked around the food.

“I’ve never seen a woman eat a banana with less finesse,” he paused and began laughing again. “You look like a, what do you call it? A chipmunk.”

“Oh?” she said frostily after she swallowed. “You often watch women perform with fruit?”

At her tone, his chuckles burst into greater gales.

She wanted to remain angry, but the sight of Marcus letting his

reserve go made her heart leap. He seemed so approachable now, so close to touch.

Unconsciously, she neared, staring at him like he was a drink of cold water in a wasteland of desert.

He saw her look of intent and stopped laughing, his ocean blue eyes swirling into storm, mirroring her need. "We have things to talk about," he said and took a step closer, bridging the distance between them.

"I know."

"There's more you should know. Things to plan." He pulled her into his arms, his gaze locked on her mouth.

Her mouth dry, she licked her lips and heard him groan.

"Later." He sealed her mouth with his.

As if they hadn't come together just last night, or even this morning, Tessa's body lit just for him. Lust surged and pooled between her thighs, and memories from their previous lovemaking peaked her desire even higher.

His hands touched her everywhere, soft and hard, urgent, yet so sensual she wanted to melt at his feet. Within moments he had her divested of all clothing, his hands stirring her arousal. His long fingers lingered over her chest, making her breasts swollen and heavy, needing more of his touch.

Lowering, he kissed her nipples, each tenderly, then more forcefully, as he suckled her, wringing from her an unwilling moan of surrender.

"Yes, *sertia*," he murmured, his mouth working magic against her sensitive nipples while one hand circled lower. His fingers parted and entered her wet heat, sliding between her lips and plunging into her vagina with a suddenness that shocked her into near climax.

"No, sweet," he breathed as he slid slowly in and out of her, adding another finger. "Let's make it last."

He laid her across his bed and stared down at her as he removed his clothing. She couldn't help sighing at his perfection. Before they'd been too rushed for her to fully appreciate his physique, but now, under the light of day, she caught an eyeful.

She'd always loved a strong upper body on a man, and Marcus made her stomach do flip-flops. He had a hard eight-pack, forget the six, and the thin stream of silky black hair that lined his sculpted chest and disappeared below his jeans made her want to trail the path with her tongue.

His eyes smoldered as he watched her watching him, and knowing she could affect him with just a look had her drowning in desire.

"I'm going to take this slowly," he promised and stepped out of

his jeans.

She swallowed audibly. His erection was strong, thick and impossible to miss. He stood before her, hungry yet cool, making her itch to shake his unruffled composure.

"How do you do it, Marcus?" she asked, her voice husky. She rose to her knees and saw his eyes darken as they fell to her full breasts. She leant forward and placed a soft kiss on his chest, encouraged at the subtle breath he took. "You're so together, when all I can think about is kissing you."

She licked the spot and kissed him lower, just above his navel. "Tasting you."

His hands fisted at his sides, and when she glanced up she noted his jaw was clenched. "Such composure," she murmured with a sly grin. "How you can be so calm when I can't stop my heart from racing. All I think about is what you'll taste like when I kiss you there." She looked down at his bobbing erection and thought she heard him groan. But when she looked up at him, his gaze was impassive.

"Do it," he dared, a tight smile grazing his lips.

"Oh, I will, lover," she replied saucily before lowering her mouth. She grasped his thighs to steady herself and immediately his stance widened, his tight muscles bunching under her hands.

She stroked his legs softly and breathed over the head of his cock, more than aware of the moisture coating his tip. Power thrived within her, a feminine energy growing with every beat of her heart.

Lowering her lips to his shaft, she sucked lightly, growing wetter as she absorbed his shattered reaction.

"Tessa, baby," he rasped, pushing against her lips. "That feels so good. Yes, *sertia*, more," he pleaded and groaned when her tongue stroked the underside of his shaft.

Tessa loved it. He was steaming, pure desire rolling off him in waves, lapping into her as if the two of them were one. She revelled in his scent and taste, and wanting to pleasure him, she took him deeper in her mouth.

With long, slow strokes, she worked him with her tongue, promising relief before easing the pressure off his shaft. She bobbed over him, letting the natural rhythm of lovemaking take over as she imagined riding him, not with her mouth, but with her body.

She was so wet, so on fire for him, her body melting at thoughts of him coming in her mouth. Just knowing she could bring him to such a state was as much a turn-on as the actual event.

He sighed her name and ran his fingers through her hair, tugging her closer when she tried to tease him again.

"Tessa, I wanted this to last." He tried to sound stern, but the

utterly enraptured look in her eyes must have been his undoing.

She withdrew from his cock and kissed the crown, making him shudder. "Oh, it's going to last," she promised, sliding her tongue along his pulsing flesh. "After you come in my mouth," she whispered and breathed on him, watching him all the while, "you're going to come inside me. We have the whole day ahead of us."

His eyes grew steadily darker, and the room seemed to cloud, a cooling mist that both refreshed and made them slick against one another. He was rock hard against her cheek, and without another word, she engulfed him entirely.

He stilled, his body clenched tight, and when she took him in the back of her throat, working him with the passion she felt for release, she watched him uncoil, sliding into desire as hot, sexy words streamed from his mouth.

He began murmuring in that lyrical language she found so compelling. Again the word '*affai*' sounded, but she was too caught up to press him on the issue.

"I'm going to come in your mouth, love," he groaned and pumped, his cock so thick and hard it was a wonder he hadn't already. "Swallow me, Tessa. Take all of me," he said thickly as he shoved one last time through her lips.

Like a waterfall, he gushed down her throat, his hot seed like sweet cream as it cascaded past her lips. He held her head firm, still conscious to protect even as his body and mind rocketed to another plane altogether.

Giving him such pleasure, she couldn't help feeling aroused and amazed at his constraint. When he'd brought her to climax, she'd been unable to think of anything but him and the pleasure. Yet he had the presence of mind to be gentle with her.

When he had thrust one last time, she swallowed the last bit of his essence and gradually released him, one glorious inch at a time.

His breathing heavy, he just stood there and gathered her to him. "*Sertia*, what you do to me," he said and kissed her full on the mouth.

He must have tasted himself for he groaned again. "You are so giving," he murmured and pushed her back to the bed. "Now it's my turn."

With every stroke of his hands and tongue, he brought her to peak but not quite over.

Her nipples grew hard and swollen as he nipped and sucked, teasing and tasting, until she wanted to cry for him to end it. And his hands. They flowed over her like water, until she understood he was using something more than the physical to bring her to ecstasy.

She watched through slitted eyes as his fingers parted her netherlips and entered her slick core, while a shimmer in the air

caressed her arms, her shoulders, her thighs.

She saw nothing out of place but felt surrounded by his liquid heat, by the emotion he didn't speak of that embraced her the more they touched.

"Please, Marcus." She gasped as his mouth trailed the path his hands had taken, settling over her mound as he parted her folds and licked long and hard. His tongue pressed over her clitoris and she arched into him, unable to stop herself.

"That's it, love, come all over me. I want to feel you shoot over my tongue," he crooned and closed his mouth over her very centre.

"Marcus," she cried as her world burst into a million fragments, like rings of pleasure flowing out from her core.

"Yes," he groaned as he lapped her arousal, licking and sucking. "You make me so hard."

Still enthralled in the rapture of his touch, she wasn't prepared when he gathered himself over her and thrust deeply between her thighs.

The feel of him, so hot and pulsing within her, pushed her into another orgasm, so incredibly unexpected she felt almost faint.

He shot into her as her walls closed on him, their wet release mingling into an ocean of pleasure. "Take it," he moaned as his seed continued to shoot. "Tessa, yes." He pumped until he was dry, loving her body into exhaustion.

When she could catch her breath, she looked up into his face, so unguarded and true. And something within her clicked into place.

"Marcus." She didn't know what else to say, how to explain to him all she felt for a man she had only really just met.

"I know," he said tiredly and leant down to kiss her softly. He withdrew from her body and pulled her into his arms, his voice husky with sleep. "We'll talk later, love. Everything can keep. Just...later."

She nodded, feeling tired as well. Stroking his hair and pulling him closer, she gave way to the exhaustion pulling her under.

Marcus lay back and crossed his arms behind his head, glad for the shady rilk trees protecting him from the sun. He stirred his fingers and cooling waters soothed his heated frame, a body still recuperating from Tessa's extraordinary lovemaking.

"She's special, that one," King Faustus said from his left.

Startled, Marcus glanced over to see his father clad in a towel and nothing else, lying on a cushion of Tanselm's thick grass as he gazed at the Quaren river beside his son.

"Do you have to be here, now?" Marcus asked, too sated to behave properly. In life he'd rarely talked to his father so, but Tessa had completely scrambled his brain. Besides, it was his dream, wasn't

it? Time to regain control of his subconscious.

“Now hold on a minute,” Faustus said hurriedly as an image of a very aroused and naked Tessa shimmered beside Marcus. “Let’s have a little talk before your af—friend returns.”

Marcus shrugged, and the image of Tessa faded. Why not? He could use the rest. Damned if Tessa hadn’t exhausted him. He could feel his toes tingling. *His toes*. He smiled and closed his eyes.

“Go ahead, Father. Say what you have to say. Nothing can ruin this moment.” He sighed in pleasure.

He heard his father chuckle and smiled. “She’s good for you, Marcus. You need to relax. About damned time.”

A ruffle of air soothed the two and a splash sounded.

Marcus opened his eyes to see his father playing in the river. He stared in surprise. “I don’t recall you ever acting so carefree before.”

Faustus grinned, his face and form so youthful it took Marcus a moment to recall his father had indeed passed into the Light. “You were always so wrapped up in the rules you missed a lot of the fun in being a prince.” A huge wave crashed over Marcus, leaving him drenched and curiously lighthearted as he watched his father splashing around.

“Your mother,” Faustus paused and his eyes twinkled, “that woman could get me to do anything she pleased. Had me wrapped around her little finger.”

Marcus nodded, happy memories chasing the sadness of his father’s passing.

“She always made me see the other side of things, brought me back when anger overcame good sense, pushed me to act when I felt indecisive.”

Marcus blinked. “Indecisive? Angry? You were perfect, Father, the epitome of the Storm Lords at their very best.” And the standard by which Marcus lived his life.

“No, son. You see through the eyes of a child.” Faustus shook his head, a spray of water refreshing nearby dragonflies. “You spent much of your boyhood with me, too much, I think. Even Aerolus lost himself in the woods rather than sit inside a stuffy court hall during penitence day. But not you.”

“I had to watch and learn,” Marcus defended himself. “So much to learn before training began.”

“You always were too serious. Now Cadmus, that boy has a sense of humour.”

Marcus rolled his eyes and watched as a screaming eagle captured a struggling eel from the water. “Cadmus is an idiot.”

“But a funny idiot.”

Marcus couldn’t help the smile curling his lips. “True. Maybe you

should be having this father/son talk with Aerolus. He's the one with all the serious issues lately." He flicked a hand and watched as a mini-whirlpool tried to suck his father closer. "I'm fine."

Faustus' grey eyes sparkled as he pushed the water away with a sweep of wind. The whirlpool died, and he left the river, beads of moisture wicked away by the gentle air he commanded to dry himself.

He sat again next to Marcus, a casual purple tunic and trousers suddenly appearing over his frame. "You always seemed the most competent of your brothers," Faustus said slowly, his tone warning Marcus to pay attention.

Sitting up off the grass, he turned to face his father, watching the sun play over his beloved face.

"Yet your mother would constantly remind me to watch out for you, that beyond your arrogance lay a well of insecurity." His narrowed gaze burned a hole through Marcus' defences.

"Come on, Father," he tried to joke the matter aside. "I am the River Prince," he said haughtily, his conceit eerily mirroring that of his father's. "The wells of Tanselm shimmer at my call."

"You command water. But you cannot command your heart. It commands you." He gave his son a sly smile and shook his head. "She won't let you rule her, Marcus. But she'll let you rule *by her*." Laughing silver eyes hardened into molten steel, and the jovial man who was his father became the stern taskmaster of the Western Kingdom once more. "And until you learn to temper your unfounded need for perfection, you will fall short when it comes to guarding that which you hold most dear."

Marcus felt his entire being flinch, yet showed no outward reaction to his father's words but a slight nod.

Faustus shook his head, frustrated, and Marcus wished he knew what to say to ease his father's burden. "Heed my words, Marcus. The river flows and bends, it does not break. But pride is like ice and cannot pass obstructions, rather it shatters when it meets resistance."

Marcus' head began to ache. "Allegories and riddles, Father? You used to speak plainly." *When you were alive*. The thought sobered him.

Faustus laughed. "Don't I know it. Irritating as hell, eh? Sorry, but that's the price I pay for crossing the Light to see you. Just make sure to believe in your heart, in yourself, and all will be well."

The sun brightened and Marcus had to shield his eyes not to be blinded.

"I guess my time's up," Faustus murmured and stood, casting a large shadow by Marcus' feet. "Remember, son, the surest way to a woman's heart is truth, and the surest way to your truth is a woman's heart." He chuckled. "Make sure you tell that to Aerolus when his

time comes. He's become too much of a know-it-all under Arim's influence."

Marcus tried to see his father's expression but couldn't look at more than his father's shadow, which lengthened under the brightness growing above them.

"I'm sorry to say this is the last I'll be seeing you for a long time, Son." Faustus blew a breath of wind over Marcus, drying him off, and in that breath was a reminder of the deep love his father felt for him.

"Remember, you are as you believe." Faustus paused and his shadow flickered. "Tell Cadmus to look at his dreams, and Aerolus to study the spaces between," he said quickly. "He'll know what I mean." His shadow vanished, then reappeared, a faint smudge upon the grass. "Damn it, see here?" he growled. "I barely said anything and I've said too much. Hell, just tell Arim she's waiting—"

The light flashed, bursting like an explosion and the shock of power shook Marcus awake. He blinked and tried to make sense of his body's odd state of awareness. Something tickled his legs, then between them, massaging his cock into a restless, aroused twitch.

"Wake up, Marcus," Tessa teased and kissed her way up his body, throwing his dream into another corner of his mind altogether. Trying to catch his breath, he groaned her name as she slithered on top of him, lost in the heat and feel of her, his father's words a distant memory.

Chapter Eight

While Tessa let the warmth of the shower soothe her, she tried to reconcile her unbelievable actions with the woman she used to be.

She knew Marcus Storm's body more intimately than she'd known any man's. And the things he'd made her feel...she shuddered, glad she was alone where she could deal with all that had happened over the past weekend.

The water sluiced over her body, taking with it her aches and pains from the sexual acrobatics she'd engaged in throughout the night.

Marcus would be lucky to stay awake through this morning's meeting.

She frowned, wishing she'd gone with him. But they'd both agreed last night that she should stay here where it was safe, both from a wraith attack and from the nameless threat at work, at least until Marcus could gauge what the office was like today.

She didn't fear the *Netharat*, oddly enough. The attack still seemed like a dream, one she had pushed to the far corner of her mind. Besides which, she'd found a surprising range of control over her newfound telepathy, and Marcus had cast some spell over her, with the help of Aerolus, to protect her from 'otherworldly' harm.

No, she dreaded the legal ramifications of her manufactured guilt in *this* world. Embezzlement, fraud—what exactly would she be charged with, and how had whoever was doing this set her up?

Finishing the shower that no longer felt relaxing the more she dwelled on her career, she changed into a pair of jeans and the loose sweatshirt she'd packed and retrieved late last night from her home. She'd been tempted to try teleporting there, but one glance from Marcus had her rethinking the idea.

Come to think of it, he'd never apologised or explained for being such a jerk, she thought, recalling his obnoxious attitude after she'd teleported yesterday. She'd been too occupied with his body last night, and Arim's surprise visit had distracted her when she'd been good and mad at Cool Blue.

She grinned at the nickname, now so unsuitable to the insatiable sex addict she'd created in the new and improved Marcus Storm. He said he couldn't get enough of her, and the way he touched her and reacted to her touch, she believed him.

She almost thought to let his crabbiness go, but she found his reaction strange and out-of-place considering how friendly they'd been before she'd attempted to teleport. Had Marcus been jealous of his brother? Had he been worried about her? The latter thought

continually resurfaced whenever she thought of his attitude, and she felt she deserved an explanation.

Throwing on her socks, she made her way downstairs, aware she had a whole 'sick day' to do nothing but relax. How oddly exhilarating.

Her body still hummed with the incredible pleasure Marcus had shown her, and she meandered into the kitchen on a cloud of satisfaction.

"Well, well, good to see you up and about," Cadmus said with a knowing grin.

She couldn't help blushing and shook her head when he laughed out loud. "You're bad," she rebuked, which only earned her another laugh.

"I was about to say the same of you. Keeping poor Marcus up all night. You'd think he'd be pleasant this morning, but he nearly bit my head off before he took off out the door."

"I'm sure you did nothing to aggravate him." She rolled her eyes at his innocent expression, and had to admit she liked Cadmus more than she'd thought she would.

"You really are a pain. A lot like my brother Tom."

"Thank you." He gave her a princely bow and she studied him over her coffee cup.

"So what's it like being royalty?"

"You don't seem impressed," he said casually and joined her at the kitchen table.

She shrugged. "I'm not. Though the parallel world thing threw me for a loop."

"It threw us, too, believe me. One minute we're arguing with Arim while the *Netharat* are attacking the castle walls, the next a pack of wild wolves are growling down at us in the middle of an unknown forest."

"Really?" She leaned closer to him, subtly aware he possessed a unique energy all his own, one curiously heavier and, well, earthier than Marcus', but no less powerful.

He nodded. "That was a year ago. Well, only a few weeks ago by Tanselm's time."

"Would you describe it to me?" At his confusion, she elaborated. "Tanselm? I'd love to see what it looks like through your eyes."

He studied her thoughtfully and smiled. "I think Marcus would much rather I didn't. Ask him and he'll show you."

She took a sip of coffee, slightly disappointed and more than a little curious. "Okay."

"It's not that I don't want to show you." Cadmus looked earnest as he tried to explain, for which Tessa gave him points. "It's just that

Marcus is a little tough when it comes to you.”

She frowned. “How so?”

Cadmus opened his mouth and closed it, then mumbled under his breath.

“What?”

“Look, don’t tell Marcus I said this, but he can be a little over the top at times.”

“You mean his arrogance?” She knew that all too well, but it masked another man, the real Marcus Storm she’d seen all too briefly yesterday.

“No. That arrogance is a part of him, what makes him Marcus. I’m talking about that scary part of him you haven’t seen.” He spoke in a low voice, as if afraid of being overheard.

Her pulse hammered. “Oh?”

“Marcus holds things in, and then when you’re least expecting it, bam! He knocks you between the eyes.” Her own eyes widened. Had she been so preoccupied with Marcus’ body she’d missed a violent, dangerous side of him? “The last time I borrowed his car and forgot to fill the tank, he waited an entire month before flooding my car, to the top.” He frowned when she laughed. “Tessa, I was in it at the time and late for a date.”

“Please. If you’d done that to me, I’d have filled your tank with sugar.” He looked horrified and she grinned. “Well, maybe nothing that drastic. But you should have seen the stuff I tried to pull on my brother when we were growing up. His second sight made it really hard to get one over on him. So when I did, it was a usually a doozy of a prank.”

He studied her curiously. “You have a close family, don’t you?”

“Yes. My parents are dead, but my brother and I have always been close and then there are plenty of aunts, uncles and cousins floating here and there.” She smiled. “It’s nice that only Tom lives close, but that the others are a drive or phone call away.”

“Yeah,” he said softly, a faraway look in his eyes. “You’re lucky to have them near.”

“I’m sorry, Cadmus.” She touched his hand lying on the table. “That was insensitive of me. You miss your home.” Curiosity got the better of her. “So when do you return? Your brother, Darius, right? He’s there now, isn’t he?”

Cadmus nodded. “He and Samantha are shaking up the west.” He smiled. “My mother is supposedly so happy she hasn’t stopped grinning since they returned.” He rolled his eyes. “Now she’s impossible about finding our *affai*. We can’t all be as lucky as Darius and Mar—” He froze at her surprise. “I mean, as lucky as Darius and *Samantha*. What was I thinking? Marla was an old girlfriend. I, ah,

hope I never make *that* mistake again.”

Tessa nodded, her thoughts awhirl. She and Marcus hadn't discussed the whole 'affair incident,' and wanting to keep the peace between them, she'd decided to put off asking him about it for another time. But with Cadmus so close, perhaps she could pester him—

“Well would you look at the time. Already ten and I haven't called Marcus to let him know how we're doing. I'll be right back,” he said and leapt over the chair in an impressive hurdle out of the kitchen.

She glanced knowingly at the wall-mounted phone in the kitchen. How convenient he needed to call Marcus now, and from another phone altogether.

She sighed and foraged for some breakfast, then straightened their living room while she looked for the remote to the television. “Men,” she muttered as she found it buried between couch cushions and pieces of popcorn and loose change.

Flipping through the channels, she spent the next few hours catching up on cable movies, deliberately immersing herself in fantasy so she wouldn't worry about Marcus and her status at Tomanna.

“That looks good,” Cadmus said and plopped down beside her on the couch. She nodded and watched with him in silence as Russell Crowe cut through a bevy of barbarians in the opening scene of *Gladiator*. “Just like the real thing.”

She grimaced and flipped the channel to a local cooking show.

“Sorry,” he murmured and gave her a repentant grin, which had her sighing. How could she stay mad at a man who looked just like Marcus, but who had a boyish, almost irresistible charm?

“So, that must have been some phone call,” she mused as she watched him from the corner of her eye. She glanced at the clock on the mantle of the fireplace. “Four hours long.”

He had the grace to flush and held up his hands in surrender. “What can I say? The time got away from me. You know how charming Marcus can be.” She chuckled at the outright lie. “But in my defence I did have some work to do for Gerry, my boss.”

She frowned. “You work nights, don't you?” Last night Marcus had briefly mentioned his brothers' habits to prepare her stay. “You should be sleeping now, not playing babysitter to me.”

“Not true.” He shook his head, his lips curling into a sly grin. “I might work nights, but I'm not a complete deadbeat during the day. I had some work to do for Gerry since we're a little short-staffed at the moment.” At her confusion, he explained. “I assumed Darius' spot as bartender at Outpour, you know, that hot, new nightclub? You had to have heard about it by now.”

“Outpour, right. I've been wanting to go but I've heard it's always

so crowded.”

“Yeah, and now that Ellie, Gerry’s saint of a bartender,” he added with a scowl, “is gone, I’m trying to take up the slack. You would think the club couldn’t exist without her the way Gerry’s been carrying on. Granted, she was a hell of a hard worker, but I’ve worked my ass, I mean, butt off to make the transition a smooth one.”

“It must have been a shock for them to have you taking over. I mean, Marcus seemed larger than life when I first met him. But seeing the three of you together really shocked me.”

“Ah, actually, they think I’m Darius. It was easier for him to leave and me to slide into his ‘personality’, so to speak.” He looked uneasy. “I don’t like pretending to be who I’m not, but with the wraith threat what it is, it’s better they think I’m him so that he and Samantha can settle in at home. Soon enough, word will leak out Darius has returned. But until he’s ready, I’m him.”

Cadmus scowled and glared at her. “Dammit, Cadmus, you’re not funny. Stop making jokes. Life’s a serious matter.” When she looked at him in puzzlement he sighed. “It’s a much better impression if you know Darius, and if I could throw a fireball you’d laugh your ass—I mean, head off.”

She grinned. “I think it’s just as much fun to see how often you can curse and correct yourself. Geez, Cadmus, give it a rest already. I have an older brother, and I’ve worked with men for the better part of my career. A few ‘asses’ won’t do irreparable harm.”

He sighed with relief. “Good, because trying to follow the rules Marcus set out before he left is killing me. I can take swearing off the list.”

“List?” She grinned. That was *so* Marcus.

He grinned back. “I’m not to touch you, sit more than a foot near you, flirt with you, curse around you, do anything perverse—though I’m not really sure what that entails—or annoy you.”

She laughed, she couldn’t help it. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Marcus is totally anal retentive, not that you didn’t already know that.” Cadmus rolled his eyes. “I love him, but he’s such a pain in the ass it hurts.”

She shook her head. “Maybe to you he is because you provoke him.” At his disbelief, she relented with a smile. “Okay, he can be hard to handle, sometimes. But since getting to know him, I see a very likable person. I can now understand why everyone at Tomanna loves him.”

“So what is he like at work? And speaking of work,” he said quickly to stifle her questions. “He told me to tell you nothing happened at all. No one is looking for you, and it’s like the threat against your career doesn’t exist. He’ll give you the details when he

gets home.”

She nodded, unhappy to have to wait for answers. “Did he say when he’d be back?”

“The usual time.”

Damn. That meant another four hours before she could pester him with questions, not to mention she actually missed the conceited sex maniac.

“Tell me about Marcus,” Cadmus prodded.

“At first I thought he was a cold fish.” Tessa smiled at Cadmus’ grin “But even so, I couldn’t deny he was an incredibly talented cold fish. He’s amazing at his job. He has a knack for knowing what sells. Add to that his charm and polish and our clients practically beg to work with him.”

She thought about him, how everyone kowtowed to the blue-eyed manipulator and couldn’t help a small sigh. “The women love him and the men all want to hang out with him. He’s unfailingly polite and courteous, if a little distant.” She shook her head, thinking about Marcus and all his redeeming qualities she’d always before tried to ignore. “And with a face and body to kill for, that, uh,” she faltered, realising what she’d just said and to whom.

Cadmus gave her a wolfish grin and winked. “Thanks, Tessa, you just made my day.”

She blushed and he laughed.

“Amazing how sexy you can look when you blush. Wouldn’t have thought that would look good on a redhead, but, wow.”

“Shut up, Cadmus,” she grumbled, irritated but not the least uncomfortable with his comments. Talking with Cadmus was like talking with Tom, and she wondered that she didn’t feel a bit more attracted to him, considering his likeness to Marcus.

She paused and stared at him, making him wary.

“Um, Tessa? I was just kidding.”

“Hmm.” She inched closer and watched him scramble back in dismay.

“You feeling alright?”

“Yes. In fact, I feel just fine.” Leaning closer to him made her feel nothing. She didn’t want him at all, and the fact he didn’t want her attentions made her feel that much better. The Storm brothers obviously didn’t poach. She liked their ethics.

“You sure?” He looked ready to flee at her slightest movement.

Feeling mischievous, she jerked towards him and watched him lose his balance off the couch in his haste to keep his distance.

She laughed so hard she cried, and when she saw him glaring at her from across the room, she laughed some more.

“Glad one of us is enjoying this,” he muttered as he regained his

feet.

“Problem?” Marcus asked from the hallway. He stared at them in curiosity.

Cadmus shook his head. “Your girlfriend is more like you than I’d thought.” He backed out of the room. “Evil woman,” he mumbled and left her and Marcus alone.

“What did you do to him?” Amusement laced his words as he leant down to drop his briefcase. She told herself being referred to as his girlfriend meant nothing. No reason for her pulse to race, her insides to turn to mush.

“I was messing with his mind.” She shrugged and waited for him to sit beside her on the couch. “What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming home ‘til later.”

He sat down and flowed into her, one moment settling into the cushions, the next plastering himself to her body with a mind-stealing kiss.

After a breathless moment, he pulled away, leaving her stunned and vaguely annoyed he’d stopped.

“Do you want to hear about work?” he asked calmly, a glint in his eyes.

“What? Yes, yes I do,” she said, trying to grab hold of her rampant hormones.

Male satisfaction darkened his gaze, and he smiled before detailing his day.

Everything had been so *normal*. “...So now we know it’s relatively safe to come in tomorrow. I need your help on a few items at work, especially since I’m behind from this weekend and now doing the job of *three* men.” He gave her a measuring glance, one that made her flush.

“Hey, it’s not my fault.” She tried to dismiss the heat staining her cheeks. “You really wouldn’t have gotten Conklin’s go-ahead using so many employees on one account. Besides, you needed to be taken down a peg.” Her eyes narrowed at the memory. “You were deliberately cruel mentioning Davis, who, by the way, will never come within ten feet of me without losing a year of his life.”

Marcus glanced away and she knew she’d hit a nerve. “I apologised for that already.” He sounded stiff, and she pushed again.

“Not only were you rude then, you made a complete idiot of yourself yesterday when I did that teleportation thing into your room,” she reminded him, more curious than angry. “Care to explain that? Why are you so warm one minute, so cold the next?”

He looked agitated and she regretted, if only for a moment, she’d confronted him right as he returned from work—at *three in the afternoon*?

"And why are you home so early?"

"I *had* wanted to be with you," he said coolly and made to rise.

"No, not this time." She forcibly tugged him back down to sit next to her. "Explain it to me, Marcus. I want to understand you."

Sighing, he pulled at his tie. *Might as well tell her.* He had been a bastard about Davis. "I apologised about Davis, and I really am sorry. But Tessa, you had me so stirred up," he paused, the sincerity in his eyes unmistakable. "I wanted you so much that day in the office." He clearly recalled his first taste of her, and incredibly, he was hard as a pike. "I wanted to fuck you right there on my desk," he said hoarsely, shocking her with his crude language.

"Oh," she said in a tiny voice.

He laughed roughly. "Yeah, *oh*. You make me say and do things I normally wouldn't."

She was quiet a moment. "And when I teleported?"

His eyes narrowed as he recalled the monumental fear he'd felt when she'd vanished right in front of him. "It was a foolish thing for you to do. You might have been killed. You could have transported anywhere, into anything. Aerolus had no right to ask you to do that."

She stared at him, her hand stroking his shoulder as if soothing a wild animal. Oddly enough, her touch calmed him.

"You were worried," she said quietly, making him feel weak for being afraid.

"No, I—"

"It's okay, Marcus," she said with a small smile. "I was just as terrified when Arim showed up. I thought he was a wraith and I just... reacted."

He frowned, recalling how reckless he'd been accepting Arim's presence.

"I should have protected you better."

"Better?" Her baby-blue eyes stared in astonishment. "You took a beating to your back, and even healed, he left scarring bruises on you that haven't faded."

"They will," he said, surprised at her accusing tone. "It's only been a day, Tessa."

She blinked. "Funny, it feels like a lot longer."

He knew the feeling. Since she'd been here in his home, Marcus felt as if he and Tessa had known each other forever. And instead of feeling cloying, she felt like a breath of freedom, a wash of vitality that made him feel things he shouldn't.

He still refused to admit it to himself, but he knew, deep down, what she was to him. A better man would have grabbed her already. But some part of him wasn't yet ready for what bonding with Tessa

would entail. He needed to return home, hell, he *wanted* to return. But to be king when he could barely protect a woman who was coming to mean so much to him?

“Marcus?” She stroked his hair, and he wanted to close his eyes and never move from this spot again. “Are you okay? You look a little funny.”

“I’m fine, now,” he said on a sigh, content to let her massage his scalp and run her fingers through his hair.

“My, isn’t this cosy.”

‘Sin Garu floated above them, a wry smile teasing his perfectly sculpted, blood-red lips.

Chapter Nine

Marcus instinctively shielded Tessa as he shot a blast of water from his fingertips and pushed a tremendous amount of psychic force at the sorcerer, neither of which did anything to the smiling evil floating above them. Instead, the attack passed through him, his image as transparent as the bay window glass over which he loomed.

"It's not real," Tessa whispered, staring at 'Sin Garu in what looked like fascinated disgust. "Just an image of him."

Marcus withdrew his waters and quickly recited another protection spell around Tessa, adrenaline surging through his system like a drug. How the hell had 'Sin Garu penetrated the house's shields?

"Good morrow, water bringer. And to your *friend*, how wonderful to finally meet her, face to face as it were." The sorcerer turned his attention to Tessa, staring at her from powerful yet venomous dark blue eyes. "She's truly unique. Beautiful," he murmured and glanced at Marcus. "Too much for a commoner like you."

"Commoner, my ass," Tessa said angrily, surprising Marcus with her temper. "He's a royal prince, what the hell are you?"

Marcus widened his stance in front of her, warmed by her defence, but conscious 'Sin Garu was dangerous in any state he appeared. "What is it you want, sorcerer?" he asked calmly, prepared to withstand an attack at any moment.

"I just wanted to exchange greetings, Marcus. I keep missing Darius. I thought it most remiss on my part not to have greeted you sooner, so here I am. And I so wanted to meet *you*, Tessa." He grinned, his smile showing sharp, white teeth. "Such passion. That fiery red hair, that creamy white skin. Such luscious breasts." 'Sin Garu's nostrils flared and his eyes gleamed as he stared at her groin. "I'll bet she tastes—"

"What do you want, sorcerer?" Marcus repeated softly, the icy threat clear in his tone.

"Your brother would have ripped my head off by now," 'Sin Garu chided. "You're not as much fun. But I'll bet she is."

Marcus simply stared, aware of Tessa pressed against his back. She was tense, but thankfully, left the verbal sparring to him.

"Fine." 'Sin Garu sighed. "I sense I'm not welcome here. I'll leave." He eyed Tessa with hunger. "But before I go, I just wanted to say I'm glad you avoided a prison sentence. We have much to talk about, you and I."

Marcus stared at the sorcerer, and suddenly wondered at the spell he'd overheard Aerolus practicing the other day. He murmured it under his breath and watched as a thin trickle of blood ran from the

sorcerer's nose.

With a confused frown, 'Sin Garu wiped at his nose and stared, his blue gaze churning with both anger and pain.

"You'll pay for that, Marcus." He sneered, his threat muted by the gurgle of blood that suddenly flowed over his thin lips. 'Sin Garu began flashing in and out, his projection choppy.

He shimmered and spoke one last time. "River Prince? The Djinn bedamned. You both belong to me, and *no one else*. When next we meet, your last broken breath will be at my feet, begging for mercy. And you, Tessa, you'll be mine for as long as you can survive it."

His threat hanging in the air like a dark cloud, he vanished.

Marcus stared at the ceiling, nonplused that the spell he'd used had worked, and that 'Sin Garu had been there at all. He turned and glanced at Tessa.

"No, he was there. I saw him, plain as day." She studied the ceiling, then focused on Marcus. "Explain to me what just happened here." She swallowed loudly and he noted her hands trembling until she saw him staring and clenched her fists.

Damn, but she had strength. Trust Tessa Sheridan to handle wraiths, Storm Lords, and an impromptu visit from the leader of an evil army bent on death and destruction. A small smile curled his lips and seeing it, his Amazon exploded in temper.

As she ranted and raved about his stupid sense of humour, the right and wrong time to be brave, and denounced every other aspect of the male species in general, Marcus couldn't help wondering how he, of all his brothers, had been gifted with such a woman.

This visit with 'Sin Garu made him see that avoidance wasn't the answer. Ready or not, Marcus would have to face his responsibilities, first here in this plane and then at home. Evil didn't set schedules, and women, he thought as he studied the passionate female in a tirade before him, were just as dangerous to a man's sense of order.

The more he watched her, the faster his heart beat. His internal temperature rose, and had he been capable of such, he would like to have channelled his churning energy through his living waters into steam. As it was, he transferred much of his pent-up energy to the lake beyond his house. Past Tessa's form pacing in front of the bay window he could make out a crowd gathered around a raging water fountain that had no reason for being, but served as a place to release his pressing adrenaline rush.

"Are you even listening to me?" Tessa snarled and stepped forward, poking him in the chest.

"My *affai*," he muttered in angry acceptance, staring into her irate gaze.

She paused, her mouth wide with surprise. Before she could ask

him a thing, however, he shut her up with a kiss.

Desire raged within him, a tidal wave of need that swept him into branding her as his. His mouth conquered, demanded more from her than he'd ever asked of another woman. His tongue fought against hers, tangled and stroked as a helpless moan surged from Tessa's soul. He cared nothing for propriety, for tenderness, but needed to enforce his hold on his woman—on his *affai*.

The primitive energies of the Storm Lords seethed in his blood, and in the dim corner of his mind he thought he heard his father's encouragement. Water swept over the room like a burst dam, pushing and flowing between and through Marcus and Tessa until they were one with the element and with each other.

Marcus pressed his hands down her back to rest on her taut ass, pulling her into his thickening erection. Drinking her passion through a bruising kiss, he continued to fan both his and her excitement by rubbing against her mound, his cock heavy and throbbing, needing her like he needed his next breath. He rounded a hand to the snap of her jeans and would have progressed further when a loud voice interrupted them.

"Whoa, waterboy! Time out! That's a plasma screen TV for Light's sake!" Cadmus hissed in displeasure as he stared around the soaked room, stepping gingerly around a growing puddle.

Aerolus stood behind him, his mouth open in what had to be a first. *Aerolus, stunned speechless?*

Unfortunately, not, Marcus thought sourly as Aerolus closed his mouth and blinked as if waking from a dream.

"Sorry to intrude," his brother said. Tessa tried to extricate herself from Marcus' grip, obviously embarrassed, but he refused to let her go. Not now, not after his battle with his conscience that he'd finally won. "But what were you doing in here?"

With a wave of Marcus' hand the water in the room vanished, leaving the room completely dry, Cadmus' precious television in working order.

"Satisfied?" he asked dryly.

"More than are you at the moment," Cadmus muttered, his crass comment causing Tessa to blush a most becoming shade of rose.

Aerolus broke the small silence, staring at the ceiling, his mouth tightening the longer he stared. "'Sin Garu was here.'" He quickly glanced from Marcus to Tessa. "You're alright? Both of you?" He eyed Marcus with a particular scowl.

Cadmus paled. "I was just outside in the yard, and you're telling me 'Sin Garu was here? In our living room? In our *protected* house?" He shook his head in disbelief at Marcus. "What did he want?"

"He wanted Tessa."

“He wanted you more,” Aerolus said in a vague voice as he again studied the ceiling. “He was dissociated across planes, an advanced and difficult spell even for a sorcerer of his calibre. Yet you defeated him. You defeated him,” he said again, in a puzzled tone.

The statement was more a question, and Marcus could see Aerolus’ frustration. His brother normally knew everything about everything, his otherworldly powers having grown exponentially while in this world. Yet now, curiously, Aerolus couldn’t read Marcus’ cast spell.

Interesting. “I sense some irritation, Aerolus,” Marcus said coolly, actually enjoying himself. For once he knew something his annoyingly uncanny brother didn’t.

“Irritation? No.” Aerolus took a deep breath and appeared the soul of calm, but Marcus sensed the agitation vibrating subtly along his brother’s spine.

“Marcus, just tell him what he wants to know.” Tessa sighed and practically slid into the couch. “Lord, my legs are like water,” she muttered, leaning her head back on the cushions.

Satisfaction filled him, knowing he’d put the weakness in her knees. “We were sitting here talking when *he* appeared, a full-sized image of ‘Sin Garu floating above the windows there.” Marcus pointed to the spot. “He threatened and said a few unpleasant things to Tessa.”

“You know how much he dislikes the people in this realm.” Aerolus stroked his chin. “He thinks they’re beneath him.”

“Like someone else we know,” Cadmus grumbled, giving Marcus a testy look. Marcus knew the insult for what it was, belated worry and disappointment that Marcus hadn’t called for help dealing with the evil sorcerer.

“You’re telling me he talked to her?” Aerolus studied his brother and Tessa both.

“Yes, he talked to *her*,” Tessa answered testily, her feet propped up on the coffee table, her head tilted back on the couch.

Marcus frowned. He didn’t like ‘Sin Garu’s familiarity with his *affai* either, but Aerolus’ interrogation made him see beneath the threat of ‘Sin Garu’s presence. Something more was going on here, something he needed to understand to protect Tessa from future harm.

“That spell you were working on last week,” Marcus said softly, now wondering just why he’d remembered that one spell among the multitude Aerolus practiced. “Something about its properties led me to believe it might help me in dealing with ‘Sin Garu.”

Marcus watched in astonishment as Aerolus’ eyes shifted from light grey to dark black. Never before had he seen his brother so close to losing control. Tessa blinked up at him, and even Cadmus swore in

shock.

"You dared use an untried spell on the most dreaded wraith lord to ever descend upon our people? You could have wiped out half this block with an overload of power. You could have mismanaged the incantation and done more damage to yourself than him." His voice was lethal for its quiet, his eyes pulsing with a strange, almost unholy light. "You could have been killed."

"Uh, Aerolus?" Cadmus ventured. "You're freaking me out."

"Shut. Up." Aerolus glared, his eyes swirling with power. Cadmus tried to respond but was suddenly struck mute. "And you," Aerolus turned to Tessa, watching her quietly. Marcus sensed his brother was seeing a replay of the confrontation in her mind's eye, a remnant of the magic impressed on her. "You tried baiting 'Sin Garu. Are you losing what last bit of sense you have left?" His tone was biting. "As if sleeping with this jackass wasn't enough of a mistake?" Furious, his adrenaline still full enough to lick good sense, Marcus' blood iced. He narrowed his eyes and with a flick of his wrist, slammed Aerolus against the wall.

The spell holding Cadmus mute broke. Rubbing his throat, he swore in a mixture of several languages. "Damn it, Aerolus. You mute me again and I'll turn you into rock bits." He glared at his pinned brother, and coils of energy rattled the walls and the very space surrounding Cadmus.

Aerolus shook his head and tried to free himself from Marcus' hold but found himself unable to. Marcus smirked, glad to be in control of his contained, 'younger' brother for once. The smirk sent the normally mild-mannered Aerolus into a tailspin.

He began murmuring, his eyes glowing, and Marcus quickly filled his mouth with water. Coughing and spitting, Aerolus actually glared as he tried unsuccessfully to free himself from his brother's bonds.

"If you're both finished?" Marcus asked his brothers in his haughtiest voice. Though they glared at him, he knew they would listen, Cadmus because he felt like it, Aerolus because he had no choice. "I defeated 'Sin Garu *for the moment*. Leave it at that, Aerolus. I don't normally pay attention to your sorcery, but something made me take notice of your spell. Think about that."

Marcus knew his father had something to do with that, he felt it deep in his bones. So much for Faustus playing by the rules. "The point of all this is to determine how 'Sin Garu slipped past our safeguards." Something the sorcerer said bothered him. Releasing his hold on his now calm brother, he glanced down at Tessa and saw to his surprise she slept, her breathing soft and even.

"He mentioned something I should have thought of before."

"What?" Cadmus and Aerolus asked at the same time, causing

Cadmus to reluctantly grin and Aerolus' eyes to lighten to grey.

"He said, 'The Djinn bedamned' before threatening to kill me without mercy. And he mentioned the possibility of Tessa going to jail."

Cadmus swore. "Arim warned us the Djinn were here, but I didn't think we'd have to worry about them confronting us head on. They normally do their damage behind the scenes." Marcus knew he referred to the poisoning of the Storm Lords, in particular their father.

"Apparently the Djinn have grown bolder," he said, more than disturbed by this revelation. "If 'Sin Garu is this aware of Tessa's recent problems at work, it stands to reason he's got a spy at Tomanna, despite our efforts to shield ourselves."

"Or he's got a scrying portal in effect."

Marcus shook his head. "No, I don't think so. The way he worded it, *The Djinn bedamned*, made me think he's getting his information from a Djinn source."

"An internal spy at Tomanna." Aerolus nodded, his face blank but his eyes burning bright.

"That's the only answer that feels right." Ice filled Marcus' veins, anger and frustration building at the thought of having been vulnerable to the Djinn threat for so long.

Cadmus frowned. "But they hate the light of day. How do they know so much, and how could they have known about Tessa so quickly? It's been what, three days since you and she, uh," he paused, glancing from a sleeping Tessa to Marcus' challenging stare. "Let's just say you and she haven't been too friendly with one another until recently."

"That's what has me bothered," Aerolus added. "I agree with you, Marcus. It's Djinn interference, and I have a bad feeling they've adapted to the light in this world. And worse, that they've adapted so well to this environment they've learned to mask their presence completely. You work mostly days, and you've never sensed them?" he asked Marcus.

Marcus shook his head.

"The more I think about it, the more I have to agree. The Djinn have infiltrated Tomanna Consulting, and most likely the bar as well, Cadmus."

Cadmus scowled but didn't disagree.

Marcus ran a weary hand through his hair, his adrenaline rush beginning to subside now that 'Sin Garu had vanished and they were apparently safe, for the time being. "The Djinn are another problem, but 'Sin Garu tops the list. What do we do about his recent visit here?"

"And how did he penetrate our defences?" Cadmus asked, his voice curiously neutral.

Aerolus tapped his lip in thought, his eyes alighting with the answer. “To project through the shield spells, ‘Sin Garu sent his image, not himself. Our shields were too strong for his physical presence. But he did lock in on you, Marcus, you or Tessa, that is,” he said in afterthought. Turning troublesome eyes on Tessa, he shook his head.

“The only way he could have worked around us and Arim was with the aid of a scrying stone, and to use that, he had to possess something personal from either you or Tessa.”

“If he had a Djinn infiltrator working under him, he could have stolen anything from mine or Tessa’s office at any time in the past six months.” Marcus cursed in disgust. “I can’t believe I let a Djinn get so close to me.”

“It’s not your fault.” Aerolus placed a hand on Marcus’ shoulder to hold him still. “None of us have sensed them, so the Djinn must have found a way to mask their presence. ‘Sin Garu is more powerful than any sorcerer I’ve ever seen, except for Arim. And Arim doesn’t have the power of the dark ones in his corner.”

Marcus’ tone was grim, but determined. “No, but Arim does have the Storm Lords. And I’ll be damned if I’ll let the *Netharat* and that evil bastard put one more putrid foot near Tessa or Tanselm again.”

Ending his impassioned speech, he noticed his brothers staring at him in surprise. He didn’t care. Marcus had as good as made a commitment to Tessa moments ago, and despite his insecurities about the future, he knew he would die before letting ‘Sin Garu soil anything more that he loved.

Aerolus stared hard at his brother, wondering if Marcus was aware of what he’d just said and what it meant. He’d put Tessa before Tanselm, and Marcus had never allowed any woman to come between his family and home, ever.

His normally cool and composed brother had practically admitted his feelings for the beautiful woman lying so peacefully on their couch.

Aerolus studied her, aware of Marcus’ concerned frown.

What was it about these *earth* women that pulled his brothers in different directions? Darius, the most stubborn of them, was now almost a tamed beast because of his *affai*. And Marcus, well, the aloof man had a spark in his eyes, a heat that churned whenever in Tessa’s presence.

No matter that Tessa had only recently become involved in Tanselm’s plight. Aerolus could sense her strength of will, her intelligence and integrity that were the core of her being.

He subtly nodded his approval, pleased his brother had found someone to care for, someone to help him heal the invisible wounds

inflicted by his father's death.

Much as Marcus tried to pretend he was better than everyone around him, Aerolus knew it was all an act. His ability to dreamwalk was growing, and what he'd witnessed in Marcus' dreams was both worrisome and increasingly odd.

Bewildering images flared, a confusing jumble of thoughts and visions from the normally unflappable Storm brother. Since Marcus had met Tessa, his dreams had been strange, surreal.

Aerolus had seen Tessa both dressed in Tanselm's fine silks and naked—by the Light, *gloriously naked*. He'd witnessed his dead father in muffled, long talks with Marcus while the two relaxed by the QuarenRiver. And he'd seen the monstrously large wall of responsibilities Marcus didn't think he would ever conquer.

Aerolus glanced at his brother, concerned with the dark blue gaze that seemed so unsure about his role in Tanselm's future, so uncertain he was worthy of the task set before them by their father and by fate. Only Tessa seemed to give him a moment's peace.

Marcus lifted Tessa into his arms and took her up the stairs to his room. Watching them, Aerolus *knew* Tessa could help Marcus realise his potential as king of the southlands, and perhaps even as Tanselm's overking. She certainly met his brother more than halfway. Finally, a woman Marcus wouldn't be able to dominate.

But Aerolus' good humour at the situation faded as he understood what their love would mean to *him*. All too soon he would lose another brother to Tanselm. Another Storm Lord 'freed', only to be bound to home and hearth.

Much as Aerolus longed to return home, the thrill of learning new things and exploring new worlds filled him with excitement, and a longing for an existence he knew lay just out of reach. He was more resigned than accepting of his place as future ruler of Tanselm. A waste, to his thinking, that a sorcerer should be destined to be king.

He inwardly winced at the possibility of becoming Tanselm's overking. If only he could immerse himself in study, in sorcery's vast adventures of the mind.

He wondered if Arim knew how lucky he was.

Cadmus threw an arm around his neck, startling him from dreary, futile thoughts. "Don't worry, bro." Cadmus chuckled as he stared after Marcus and Tessa. "I'll still be here with you."

Apparently, Cadmus also knew Marcus had found his *affai*.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Aerolus couldn't help a small sigh.

Cadmus laughed. "Very funny. Trust me when I say I don't plan to marry, ever. So once Darius and Marcus have a brood of their own, we're off the hook. And don't try telling me you don't miss Tanselm." He looked around him and lowered his voice. "If anyone can get us

back without finding an *affai*, it's you."

"Cadmus—"

"Come on, Aerolus. You don't want to wed any more than I do." Aerolus couldn't argue with that. "So work your magic and find us a way home." Curiously, Cadmus looked puzzled and almost, desperate? "I'm sick of this place, sick of *Outpour*." He snarled the word. "I don't know how Darius stood it, day after day. And now that Ellie's coming back..."

Aerolus felt the hair on the back of his neck tingle at the name. *How very strange*. "Ellie?"

Cadmus opened his mouth to speak and stopped. He turned suddenly, looking around him.

"Cadmus?"

"Sorry." He shoved a nervous hand through his hair and Aerolus couldn't help but stare. The normally funny, self-effacing 'youngest' of the Tetrarch looked uneasy.

"If work's bothering you, just quit," Aerolus said slowly, watching Cadmus for signs of spell tampering. Despite his nerves, his brother looked fine, hell, he *felt* fine. But something was bothering him.

Sighing, Cadmus rubbed his eyes. "I can't quit, not until I know," he paused and shook his head. "Never mind. Look, I have a few hours until work. I need some rest before I go in tonight. I'll talk to you later."

Aerolus watched with concern as Cadmus vanished upstairs. Marcus and now Cadmus had issues he couldn't *see* and didn't know how to help, and his lack of control over the situation irritated him on a most basic level. He took a deep breath and centred himself.

If Aerolus was anything, he was in control.

He breathed out, calm once more, when a flash of light in the kitchen caught his eye. Already on his guard due to 'Sin Garu's inconceivable interruption, he automatically switched to warrior mode, teleporting into the room in a heartbeat. Ready for an otherworldly attack, he released a tense breath when he noted the blinking microwave.

Apparently one of his brothers had forgotten he'd prepared a cup of hot water.

With a sigh, he opened and slammed the microwave door shut to still the incessant blinking, allowing his frustration to the surface just this once. Tired and wishing he could be more than what royalty prescribed him to be, he sank down into a chair and stared at the pink-streaked sky through the kitchen window.

"I wish I had more time." But he felt the clock ticking. Though he didn't have Cadmus' second sight, he knew it was only a matter of time before he found his own *affai* and returned to Tanselm.

He sighed again and wished for hopeless possibilities, weaving a small wind in the strands of magical energy he'd found waiting idly in this world. He wiggled his fingers and the energy pulsed, colours flaring and lights flashing like a private dance.

His deepest wish, to lose himself in the yawn of magical understanding, sat before him, symbolised by the garish, raw magic that swirled in a small pocket of life unexpected in a world devoid of magic.

He stared into the powerful breath of energy, wishing to rule not a kingdom, but his own mind, learning and teaching the streams of conscious and untapped magic of the esoteric world.

Dreams flickered and died before him as his command over the spurious energy faded. Tamping down the pointless fantasy, he shook his head and focused on what really mattered—his brothers and the future of Tanselm.

Focused on what he knew was the more important worry at the moment, he missed the flash of light by the hallway, monitoring his every move.

Chapter Ten

Tessa glanced around her office, waiting for the other shoe to drop. She'd been back to work for two days now, two long, tension-ridden days so full of paperwork she shouldn't have had time to worry about her foretold 'fall from grace'.

Yet her brother Tom had never been wrong in his predictions, and though everyone at Tomanna acted normally, she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched by a malevolent force, whether that of an otherworldly presence or an all-too-human backstabber, she couldn't tell.

"You going to sign that, or should I come back next week?" a wry voice asked from her doorway.

She flushed as her boss caught her daydreaming. "Sorry, Jonas."

He stepped in and shut the door behind him. Immediately her heart began pounding. Was this it? Would security take her away in cuffs?

"Tessa?" His thoughtful brown eyes looked concerned. "You look pale. Are you sure you're fully recovered from that virus?"

A stomach virus had been a simple and easy way to account for her absence Monday. And just thinking about having to go to jail made her more than a little queasy. "I'm fine. I skipped lunch, so I'm hungry more than anything else."

He nodded and relaxed. "Good. We've got so many projects underway, I'm going to need you now more than ever." Jonas outlined the two new clients Tomanna had recently acquired. "Kudos to our sales team is all I can say. I don't know how we did it, but we got both Portlin Paper and Ryders to agree to a helluva contract."

"Made a deal with the devil, no doubt," Tessa muttered as she signed the document Jonas needed.

Marcus had taken pains last night at dinner to inform her he would personally oversee both new accounts. Apparently, the astute sales team at Tomanna had brought Marcus into the equation to cinch the deal. His reputation preceded him, a fact that hadn't surprised Marcus, or Tessa, truth be told. *Of course*, she thought nastily, *it didn't hurt that both company reps had been women.*

Why new business soured her she couldn't—didn't—want to say. More business meant more work, and more work meant a greater budget, making her life easier. She normally thrived on the high stress of her job, but knowing her career sat on the brink of destruction and that evil, real evil, could descend upon her at any time was taking its toll.

Notto mention the acid in her gut every time the flinty Judy

Hardenmeier tittered about Marcus' latest conquests and his 'gorgeous blue eyes'. Hell. Judy was old enough to be Marcus' mother, not to mention she'd helped Tessa nudge Marcus out of three staffers just a few days ago. Funny how the woman seemed to have forgotten that fact. Now Marcus could do no wrong—as if he needed the encouragement.

To make matters worse, he'd been surprisingly distant since she'd returned to work. No more steamy nights filled with erotic play between the sheets. Cool Blue had returned with a vengeance. Oh, he was cordial and not unpleasant at home, but he avoided her outside of family dinners with his brothers. It made her wonder if their brief time together meant anything to him.

Affai. Ha. Obviously he'd said it in the heat of the moment, the scare of 'Sin Garu magnifying their attraction.

She felt a fool to be hurt by his aloofness. The old Tessa would have raged at him, actively confronted him and settled things. But Tessa had too many distractions of her own to deal with, and quite frankly, she didn't have the energy to deal with the questionable issue of 'them' right now.

As long as they didn't talk about their 'relationship', for lack of a better word, she didn't have to face the sorry fact they had no future.

"So are you going to mangle them first, or can I have my papers back whole?" Jonas drawled. While she'd been stressing over Marcus, her boss had been patiently waiting, studying her too-expressive face.

She blushed and handed him the documents, hoping her distress hadn't shown.

"Thanks." Jonas stood, his handsome face as enigmatic as ever. "I know I don't need to remind you we have a budget meeting at eight tomorrow morning concerning Davis' yields for Surell."

Damn it all to hell. I'll be here all night.

"You do know he's been angling for your job since you took the position." Jonas grinned. "Of course, that's not all he's been angling for. But you've shown yourself a woman of good taste, so enough said."

Tessa rolled her eyes, a small chuckle escaping at Jonas' familiar, if bad, sense of humour. Shaking her head, she gifted him with a grin and was surprised to see a flash of emotion light his eyes. Then he blinked, making her question what she thought she'd seen.

"Get cracking, Amazon," he teased. "And I'll make sure to keep Storm busy and out of your way."

She stared at Jonas carefully and sighed. He was perfectly normal. *No, I'm the one with issues, and an incredibly massive ego. Now everyone I see either has it in for me or has the hots for me.*

"Thanks." She put effort into appearing pleasant, driven—the

ideal employee.

He left, shutting the door behind him, leaving Tessa alone with a mountain of work and relentless thoughts about Marcus Storm, the idiot she was falling head over heels for.

Scowling at the computer, and at rumours she'd heard this morning about Marcus in a meeting with Sheila Covington, the woman so infatuated with him she'd lied about sleeping with him, Tessa forced herself to focus on work. If she didn't get started, she'd never leave.

Five hours later, after straightening her old accounts, she found the time to lightly peruse the two new ones. She had a feeling Ryders would turn a bigger profit than Portlin Papers, but under Marcus' touch anything was possible.

The door suddenly opened without warning. "You done for the evening?" asked the man on her mind. He stared down at her with an upturned brow, the one that said *bow before royalty*. Recalling how she'd bowed before him three nights ago and made *him* beg for it, she stared back.

"By the Light," he muttered and entered her office. He sat and casually crossed an ankle over his knee, his Armani suit as pressed as if he'd just taken it off the hanger. "It's seven o'clock, and we're expected at home."

Judy stuck her head in the doorway. "Tessa—oh, Marcus, you're still here," she said on a breath, her stern expression easing into one of girlish pleasure.

Apparently, Judy heard the disgust in Tessa's subtle huff for she frowned. "Is something wrong? You did send Marcus the staff he requested, didn't you, Tessa?"

Tessa could only stare in astonishment as the once firm, professional advertising executive cooed and fluttered over Marcus like a mother hen. Where was the woman who'd agreed that business concerns mattered more than charm?

"No worries, Judy," Marcus answered easily, amusement swimming in his eyes. "Tessa's been helping as much as she's able, but she doesn't hold a candle to you." He winked in her direction, and Tessa felt a slow burn begin to heat.

Judy all but melted. "Okay, well..." She cleared her throat. "Oh, and I talked to Mr. Conklin about raising your expense account. You'll be seeing an increase tomorrow."

Tessa stared at Judy in amazement. "Judy? Are you alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Her head tilted at a stiff angle, her posture defensive even as she leant towards Marcus.

"It's just that," Tessa couldn't finish. *Just that you used to dislike Marcus as much as I did. Now you're drooling over Cool Blue like he's one*

tall drink of water.

Judy arched a brow in question.

"Nothing." She found Marcus staring at her curiously. "It's been a long day. I have more work ahead of me," she said in apology. "I'll have a copy of the Surell proposal on your desk later this evening." She nodded at Judy and deliberately ignored Marcus, peeved at his ability to turn even the hard-nosed Judy into a simpering half-wit.

He frowned but stood. "Judy, I'll walk you out."

The woman positively beamed and Tessa wanted to throw them both from the room. The minute she thought it, Marcus stumbled over the threshold, Judy in tow.

"Sorry, Judy," he said tightly, a glare thrown over his shoulder. "The doorway's a tad uneven."

"No problem, Marcus," she murmured and stroked his arm affectionately.

The moment they stepped away, Tessa slammed her door shut with a thought, childishly pleased to see the last of Marcus for a while.

Watching Judy fawn over him made her think of all the others in Marcus' sordid little past, a past that now included Tessa. Damn, how many women *had* he been with? At least half the single women in the company. And not one woman had come away dissatisfied, according to the rumours she tried like hell not to listen to.

A glass vase shattered across from her desk and she forcibly put a leash on her emotions. "Time to work, not to wonder."

An hour later she had more or less wrapped things up when Jonas poked his head in to check on her. "You know, if you need help, all you have to do is ask." His lips quirked. "Davis is still here."

She studied him, aware something about him seemed off. *Damn, first Judy, now Jonas?*

Jonas' smile faded, and he entered the office. "Tessa? I was only joking. Seriously. It's late, and we have a lot to do tomorrow. What can I do to help you get out of here?"

He circled the room to stand behind her, surprising her at the large shadow he cast over her desk. She glanced over her shoulder and noted with some surprise how very large Jonas was. How had she never noticed that before?

"Tessa?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Ms. Sheridan?" Marcus said coolly from the doorway. "May I have moment of your time?" He stared pointedly at Jonas, who ignored him.

"I'll be here another hour or so if you need me." Jonas put a comforting hand on her shoulder that only aroused disquiet. He stared at Marcus almost challengingly before he squeezed her shoulder and

moved away.

“Don’t overwork my best logistician,” Jonas warned lightly, a hard look in his normally good-tempered gaze.

“I never do,” Marcus said suggestively, but he waited until Jonas left his view before turning to her.

“What the hell was *that* about?” he growled and slammed the door shut behind him as he stalked to her desk. “He had his hands all over you.”

Tessa blinked, shocked at his fury. “He had a hand on my shoulder. He’s my boss, Marcus. What’s wrong with you? It’s just Jonas.” Yet his behaviour had unnerved Tessa as well. Between Judy’s turn-around and Jonas’ odd actions, she figured someone must have spiked the watercooler.

“Open the door, Marcus. You don’t want one of *them* to see us together.”

Still scowling, he began pacing. “Them? Oh, you mean the Djinn. Hell, Tessa, they already know about us both. And ‘Sin Garu’s visit to the house clearly destroyed any notion we aren’t better acquainted.” His eyes fairly glowed as he stopped and stared at her breasts knowingly.

Immediately her nipples hardened and he smiled, his eyes hard while his mouth curled into a sensual grin. “Nice to know Jonas doesn’t get to you like this.”

“Get a grip, Marcus,” she muttered, at a loss to explain how incredibly hot his jealousy was making her.

The lock sounded overly loud as it suddenly clicked.

“Marcus?” she asked, puzzled when he came around the desk, a wolfish look on his face. He couldn’t possibly think to...no, not *here*. “Don’t you dare,” she said on a breath, but his eyes told her exactly what he planned. She grew wet thinking about it, and seated as she was, she stared eye-level at the massive bulge straining his trousers.

“I dare anything.” His voice was whisper-light and sharp as a knife. The blinds on her office door lowered as he swiftly pulled her out of her chair and turned her around, bending her over the desk. As he positioned himself behind her, he slid his hands under her knee-length skirt and pushed the material up her thighs.

“I’m going to fuck you, *sertia*,” he rasped and tugged her soaked panties down her legs with a focused thought. “Fast and hard.” The warning came as the hiss of a zipper sounded. Then she felt him pressing through the fabric of her thin skirt, between her buttocks, his erection hot and heavy as he nudged her thighs further apart.

She couldn’t believe he was touching her so intimately here at work. Though most everyone had already left, Jonas and Davis were still in the building, and who knew who else. “Marcus, no,” she

moaned, wanting to protest but unable to suppress a shiver as he rolled his hips into her.

"Tessa, yes." He lifted her skirt and surged inside her in one swift thrust.

She bit her lip and pressed backward, unconsciously offering resistance, increasing the force of his thrusts as he pounded into her.

There was no finesse here, no soft words or studied caresses, but raw, hard need. His shaft slid in and out, riding her hard and deep as he grasped her hips and drove repeatedly, reaching one hand around to toy with her clit.

His breathing increased along with hers, her orgasm approaching swiftly, catching her breath between one heartbeat and the next.

She contracted around him, felt him pulse and stiffen. "Tessa," he whispered harshly and convulsed, his shudders increasing. He gripped her hips tightly as he pumped until dry. Once finished, he eased his hold on her and began stroking her sensitive stomach, making her want him again when she shouldn't possibly.

Bent over in front of him, still joined in an erotic bond, she felt both submissive and incredibly powerful. "Well, that was one I haven't tried before," she said huskily, her body pleasantly sore from his hard use. She wiped a lock of hair from her eyes and tried to glance over her shoulder at him, but he forced her to remain in place, his mental will keeping her unmoving. The helplessness of her position only increased her arousal.

"You'll try it again with me," Marcus rasped and flexed inside her. He pumped his hips and to her amazement he began to harden. "Only with me," he added possessively, stirring her desire.

Large hands cupped her silk-covered breasts, and his palms teased her nipples to stand through both her bra and blouse. It wasn't enough. She wanted his hands on her naked flesh, and before long she had her wish.

Marcus couldn't believe how primitive he felt, taking Tessa from behind as he fondled her. He felt dominant, like a territorial male staking a claim, warning Jonas and every other man away from his *affai*.

He scowled and increased his thrusts, wanting to punish Tessa as much as he wanted to cherish her. His possessive thoughts were out of his control, and determined to push Tessa beyond her limits, he rode her without mercy, pulling her close to orgasm time and time again, but leaving her at the brink without going over.

He took her with his body, with his mind, and with his spirit that had joined with her regardless of his desire not to take an *affai*.

"Please, Marcus," she gasped as he changed the friction of his

cock, his sack grazing her hard nub. Ah, but her clit was deliciously ripe.

“Who do you belong to, Tessa?” he asked and deliberately stroked her clit while he pinched one taut nipple. With his mind he increased the pressure between her thighs, making her arch, needing more.

“You, Marcus,” she groaned and bounced as he rammed her particularly hard. With a mental pull, she urged him to give her more.

His lusty water siphon could take as much as he could give, and the knowledge made him ache to send them both to climax.

“Tell me you want me,” he rasped.

“I do.”

“Tell me you need this.” He thrust harder, pinching her nipples and stimulating her sex to a tight, pink blossom.

“Please.”

“Tell me,” he growled, his cock unbearably hard, his balls aching with the need to release.

“Marcus, I need you. Your *affai* needs you,” she keened as he pushed her over the edge.

Her contractions stimulated his orgasm, leaving him stronger for having connected with her and weaker as his seed shot into her moist womb, the pleasure making him almost lightheaded.

Once their passion ebbed, he slowly withdrew and mentally righted their clothing.

“Not bad after ignoring me for two days,” Tessa said on a breath, her hair a mass of red waves cascading down her back as she turned to face him. “What the hell is going on with you?”

He eyed her warily. The hazy afterglow of bliss combined with anger made Tessa completely irresistible. Her bright eyes were direct, and her mouth curled into a snarl that made him want to kiss the mad out of her. She was a warrior he had every intention of claiming, provided he kept her alive long enough to keep her.

He’d replayed ‘Sin Garu’s visit in his mind a hundred times, and he could come to no other conclusion but that the sorcerer wanted Tessa, badly. Oh, he wanted Marcus dead, no doubt. But desire had been there in the evil sorcerer’s murky blue gaze, a disturbing hunger Marcus had no intention of feeding.

Tessa’s lips pursed, accentuating their ripe fullness as she awaited his reply. He sighed heavily, conceding how difficult the past few days had been without her.

“I missed you,” he said gruffly, not surprised when she put her hands on her hips and stared, her eyes narrowed and bright. Obviously the woman wanted blood—*his*.

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. Damn it. He didn’t want her to see how vulnerable she made him. His life had always

been in danger, since the minute he was born. But Tessa had grown up in this world, without the threat of wraiths and dark magic, without the threat of treason and Djinn interference.

“Look, I’ve been busy the past few days.”

“Oh?” Her brow cocked high, dangerously high.

“Between the new accounts and watching for danger, I’m tired when I get home.”

“Bullshit. You’re running scared.”

He froze and returned her inspection with a frosty one of his own. “I wasn’t aware you had a degree in clinical psychology.”

“See? You only act all high and mighty when something bothers you. Face it, Marcus, I know you well enough to know something’s not right.” Her voice softened. “Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

The urge to confess his worries was surprisingly strong, but he shrugged it away. Bad enough he knew the many problems he faced as a would-be king. His future bride didn’t need to know about his multitude of imperfections.

“I’m focused on keeping you safe, Tessa,” he said calmly, trying to convince her to leave it alone. “I can still see the wraiths attacking us in my office every time I close the door. I don’t need distractions, not when your safety’s on the line.”

She frowned. “No more than yours is. ‘Sin Garu seemed more thrilled at the idea of destroying you than bothering with me.”

“But taking you would destroy me,” he admitted on a harsh breath.

Her eyes warmed and she visibly relaxed, her smile wide and welcoming. *Shit*. Now he’d have a hell of a time keeping her away from him until the Djinn threat was exposed.

“Marcus, that was a wonderful thing to say.” She laughed. “Too bad you looked like you ate a lemon while saying it.”

His lips quirked. “Look, Tessa—”

She held up a hand. “No, no, before you go pissing me off again by saying something insulting, let me have this moment.”

He rolled his eyes but couldn’t help being amused by her theatrics. “Are you finished working yet?”

“Until my eight o’clock meeting tomorrow.” She groaned and arched her back, subtly reminding Marcus of how perfectly round her breasts were. Seeing his gaze she huffed. “Don’t think that hot, sweaty sex we shared is going to distract me, Marcus Storm.” She gathered her coat and purse and unlocked the door. “We have plenty of time to talk on the way home.”

With a silent groan, he followed her out of the office and closed the door behind them. He stiffened when he saw Jonas Chase across the room watching them with a strange look. A wave of danger settled

over the space, and Marcus hastily drew a telepathic shield around his *affai*, leaving himself open to draw out his opponent.

“What—” Tessa began before following his gaze to her boss. “Not Jonas.”

The minute her eyes met those of her boss, the large man nodded and waved goodnight. He turned slowly, as if to prove he was no threat, and closed himself in his office.

Marcus took a step from Tessa, intent on having it out with Chase here and now, when Tessa grabbed him by the arm and clung like a burr.

“Oh no you don’t, Marcus. It’s not Jonas. I know it’s not.”

“Why’s that? Because you like it when he touches you?” he asked coolly, unaccountably angry she defended her boss when he could feel the truth pulsing within him. Jonas Chase was dangerous, period. Why he hadn’t seen that before he didn’t yet know.

“No, because you’re blinded by jealousy,” she said plainly, taking the bluster out of his rage. “Like I was when I heard you had a meeting with Sheila Covington this morning. Funny, you didn’t mention that part of your schedule last night at dinner.”

Suddenly the threat to his well-being came not from Jonas Chase, but from the deceptively calm redhead eyeing him like a male she’d like to neuter.

“Covington, right.” He took hold of her elbow and dragged her to the elevator. How the hell had he forgotten something so important as what had happened this morning? This was one conversation they definitely needed to have in private.

Chapter Eleven

Tessa slammed the main door to the house shut and followed Marcus' stiff back through the foyer to the kitchen—the source of the wonderful, if distracting smells that made her stomach growl. “Marcus, if you don't tell me what I want to know in the next five seconds, you can forget about ever sitting comfortably again, because my foot will be so far up your ass—”

“Tessa, Marcus, glad you finally pried yourselves away from the office,” Cadmus interrupted with a large, toothy grin.

“Just in time for *machia*.” Aerolus watched them from the stove, his grey eyes unblinking.

Distracted by food and irritated because she knew Aerolus intended the diversion, she muttered, “What the hell's *machia*?”

“A traditional dish in Tanselm. It's perfect on a day like today.” Cadmus fetched them plates of the thick, aromatic stew.

Shelving a glare for Marcus, she took a reluctant bite, then another. “Wow, Aerolus, I can't believe you made this. Did you, you know?” She wiggled her fingers.

“No magic, Tessa. I made it from scratch, allowing for the difference in vegetation between my world and this one.” He nodded to her. “You like it?”

“It's about the only thing saving me from choking the life out of your brother.” She continued to eat, amazed at her hunger. And the more she ate, the better she felt.

She glanced up to see the others eating as ravenously as she was. “Hey, Cadmus.” She stared at him in confusion. “Shouldn't you be at work?”

He shrugged. “I'm taking a sick day.”

Marcus stopped eating and stared at his brother. “Darius never took a sick day. And you're not sick, at least not physically.”

“No, I'm a regular nutcase.”

Tessa stared in concern. For once the jovial Cadmus sounded strained and not at all easygoing.

“Cadmus.” Aerolus stared at his brother and shook his head. “I can't help if you won't let me.”

“Hey, this isn't about me. It's about Marcus.” Cadmus pointed a finger. “He knows exactly who set Tessa up and why, but he's too afraid to tell her.”

Tessa blinked in amazement, riveted to Cadmus who resumed eating as if nothing had been said. “Say that again.”

“He's too afraid—”

“No, you idiot.” Marcus' gaze narrowed, his next words like ice.

“She wants to know what Sheila Covington did. And if you already knew that, why didn’t you mention it before now?”

Aerolus appeared to track the conversation, but Cadmus and Marcus were giving Tessa a headache. “Would someone please explain this to me?” Her voice rose and a flash of energy flooded the room.

She flushed at losing control, aware she’d siphoned energy not just from Marcus, but from his brothers as well. Instead of the usual accompaniment of psychic skills, however, she absorbed only pure energy, releasing the backwash she couldn’t contain into the room.

“Nice,” Aerolus said as he stared around them at something only he could see. “You’ve adapted to our elemental natures remarkably fast.”

“That’s elemental power?” she asked, somewhat dazed. But the discussion between Marcus and Cadmus reminded her to stay focused. “No, no, don’t answer that. No more questions. Marcus, I want answers. Now.”

He shrugged and his face took on an imperious cast, making her grit her teeth. Whenever he grew overly arrogant, it was a sign of his unease. And his tension set her on edge.

“Sheila requested a meeting with me late yesterday, and I didn’t mention it because I didn’t want to worry you.”

“He didn’t want to make you more jealous than you are now,” Cadmus corrected.

She fumed but didn’t correct him. Why bother hiding from the truth at this point?

Marcus shot him an irritated scowl and returned his attention to Tessa. “That’s not exactly true.” He looked uncomfortable and glared at his brothers several times. When they showed no signs of leaving, he cursed, making Tessa want to grin despite her upset with his hesitation.

“Sheila Covington is unbalanced. The woman lied about sleeping with me to everyone at the office. She fixated on me, for some reason.”

Tessa stared in amazement. “For some reason?” She eyed him up and down, giving no question as to what the woman found alluring.

His eyes glinted and he gave her a heated glance. “Obviously she’s enthralled by my good looks and killer body.” He pulled off the conceit naturally, and for some odd reason his snottiness only added to his allure. “And I am known for certain other...talents. In one particular area I’ve never had any complaints.” His eyes laughed at her knowingly. “But marriage?”

His arrogance faded when he realised how he must sound to Tessa, like the commitment-phobic playboy she’d once thought him to be. Instead of being bothered by his objection, however, she was

amused. She understood his point. Hell, she wouldn't want to be married to Sheila Covington either. The woman had looks but was a complete shrew.

Tessa wanted to laugh at Marcus' discomfort as he eyed her warily. Was she now supposed to jump on the bandwagon and demand he marry *her*? Ha. Tessa Sheridan didn't grovel. Period. When she was through with Marcus, he'd be *begging* to propose.

"As I said, the woman is unbalanced," he grumbled and dug into his food.

"Crazier than a shiiman eating worms." Cadmus nodded, scooping another bowl of *machia*.

"Not that I know what you're talking about, but I get the gist." She turned to Marcus. "So she's into you. Why come after me?"

"Apparently rumours have been flying that you and Marcus have been engaged in a secret affair for weeks," Cadmus explained with relish, his previous bad mood gone. "Nice work, bro."

Marcus ignored his brother's thumbs up, and Tessa barely managed to avoid giving Cadmus her own hand gesture. "It's not funny," she snapped at him, incensed when his grin only widened. "This is my reputation we're talking about. I don't suppose you know who started the rumour?"

Cadmus shrugged and Marcus shook his head. "Tessa, before Chase put you to work with me I only knew you as the leggy redhead all the men fantasised about."

All the men...fantasised? She blushed. He had to be kidding.

Marcus frowned. "Just yesterday I put my fist in Davis' face for —"

"You did what?" She stared in amazement. "What happened?"

"Let him finish about the crazy woman," Aerolus interrupted. "I want to know what else she said."

"She broke down when I refused to marry her," Marcus said with disgust.

"Marry her," Tessa repeated, having never heard anything so ridiculous, or annoying.

"She grew irrational when I said no, and bits and pieces of her part in discrediting you leaked through. I admit I pushed her into a full confession—for which she was immediately fired from Craiger-Mim. She saw you as competition and thought by taking you out of the picture, she and I would become one." He grimaced. "At least we now know she, not the Djinn or 'Sin Garu, concocted the idea to have you arrested."

"That's nuts." Tessa stared in disbelief.

"She was insane with lust, you might say," Cadmus threw in with

a chuckle. "Now don't blame me for pointing out the truth," he said quickly when Tessa beamed him with a dinner roll. "Look at the package she's in lust with." He pointed to himself and his brothers. "How could she help herself?" He motioned to himself as if showcasing a prize.

"For God's sake, Cadmus," Tessa huffed but couldn't help a chuckle. "This isn't *The Price is Right*."

At his confusion she shook her head. "Never mind. I want to know how she planned to get rid of me."

"She gave Leanne Sumpter a packet of files to put in your office," Marcus explained. "Files that would show you had embezzled money into a personal account."

"Leanne works in pay services," Tessa murmured, suddenly aware of just how close she'd been to prosecution. "She has full access to my pay records. She knows my bank account number, my social, my birthday." A nightmare of knowledge.

"And she'd already made the changes in the computer. Leanne didn't like you either." Marcus scowled. "If Sheila hadn't confessed, you might now be sitting in a jail cell."

"What did I do to Leanne? Don't tell me she fell for you too?" Women were dropping like flies around Marcus, and she didn't like it one bit. Not when she'd finally come to the conclusion she was keeping him.

"No. Apparently she's under the impression Jonas Chase has the 'hots' for you. And she's in love with him."

His sharp tone reminded her he still thought Jonas was a Djinn.

"Good lord, this all sounds like something that should be on a daytime soap." She shook her head, dismissing his charge about Jonas. "Assuming anything is never smart, Marcus. Don't pin your suspicions on Jonas, a man who's supported me from day one." As she scraped the last bit of *machia* from her bowl, she realised she felt lighter, as if freed from a tremendous weight she carried. The question of who wanted her gone from Tomanna had at last been answered. "Sheila Covington. Hmm. I never would have believed *you'd* be involved in trying to get me fired."

"I wasn't," Marcus said, his tone cold.

The man felt guilty about it. Good. "Maybe if you didn't play so fast and loose with women's emotions, this wouldn't have happened."

Cadmus guffawed and Aerolus quirked his lip in what looked like the hint of a smile. Marcus, however, tensed and his eyes blazed. *Not so cool and collected now, are we?* she thought with satisfaction.

"For your information, I have never in my life treated a woman with anything less than respect." He coloured, and she knew he was remembering the first time they'd kissed in his office. "Almost never,"

he muttered and pushed his bowl away, apparently having lost his appetite. "The point is, Sheila imagined something between us that wasn't there."

"Okay," Tessa said slowly, enjoying needling Marcus, especially in front of his captivated brothers. Marcus hot and bothered made her heart race. "So tell me why I saw you breaking off with a woman in public a month ago."

"Yes, do explain," Cadmus prodded.

"I remember Darius being awfully angry about it," Aerolus said, looking down into his bowl. "Something about dumping your women in public landing him in trouble with his *affai*." He turned to Tessa. "Samantha had thought Darius was the one being so callous."

Marcus' eyes blazed, and Tessa couldn't have been more pleased. This was the real Marcus, the man she wanted with her last breath, the man who intrigued her on every level.

Strong yet tender, icy cool and in command, yet perilously out of control when it came to dealing with her. *That had to be a good sign.*

"That was unavoidable, and an instance I deeply regretted." He spoke stiffly and mentally shoved Cadmus when his brother smirked. "As it happened, Sophia Mitchell brought it all on herself."

Tessa was fascinated and wanted to know more, but a comment he'd made earlier bugged her. "Yeah, yeah, you're a heart breaker, and we women are fragile flowers you try so hard not to crush."

"You're no flower, trust me," Marcus growled.

"Tell me about Davis."

Marcus looked uncomfortable and she had to know more.

"Tell me."

"Marcus punched him in the face for some rude comments he made about you," Cadmus answered her, while licking his spoon completely clean.

"Really?"

"How the hell do you know all this?" Marcus frowned and stood, conveniently taking his bowl to the sink in an attempt to escape interrogation.

Cadmus shrugged. "A vision, what else?"

"I suppose I should thank you." Tessa watched Marcus, not quite sure what to make of his encounter with Davis.

"Don't thank me for that. I should have pounded him the first time he implied less than the truth about you."

"No really, thank you," she said, genuinely pleased at his sincerity. "I wish I could've slugged him back into the Stone Age where he belongs."

"That I'd like to see." Marcus relaxed enough to share a small grin with her and a warmth unfurled in her belly.

“Right. Well,” Cadmus drawled as they stared at one another. “So where do you two go from here? You know who wanted you fired, but that still doesn’t explain why ‘Sin Garu was so interested, or even who the Djinn is that’s been feeding him information.”

“True,” Aerolus said slowly. “The Covington woman and the worker from payroll knew of Covington’s deceit. The Djinn might have overheard the two talking.”

“Or had access to the company’s personnel accounts,” Cadmus added.

“Like Jonas Chase.” Marcus said his name like a curse.

Marcus stared at the ceiling in his bedroom, wishing he could ignore the fact Tessa slept so soundly just two inches away. But just the scent of her drove him crazy, and knowing she lay nearly naked next to him, clad in one of his thin white Tshirts, was more than any man, or prince, could stand.

No matter that Tessa was not of Tanselm. No matter that she came from another plane entirely. Everything within him cried out for her, and he had already decided to accept her as his, as if that were a major hardship. He’d tried to avoid the truth, but for all his faults, he’d never lacked integrity. And the truth stared him in the face with bright blue eyes.

Tessa Sheridan was his *affai*. He knew it, and she knew it. He’d murmured the word in the aftermath of ‘Sin Garu’s impromptu visit, and he’d known he couldn’t delay the admission forever.

Hell, in the six months he’d worked at Tomanna, he’d been constantly aware of her, if only to keep her potential distraction as far away as possible.

She slid one thigh over his and murmured in her sleep, causing his temperature to rise a few hundred degrees.

Closing his eyes, he tried counting aloud the reasons he shouldn’t make love to her again, as if by uttering them in the dimness of reality he could make them convincing.

“One, the more I’m with her, the more I want to be with her, i.e., bending her over her desk and soundly claiming her has only whetted my appetite for more.” He stopped to note his present erection and shook his head. “Two, making love with her cinched our bond even tighter, confusing my focus and making her more vulnerable to Djinn attack.”

She shifted, and he sucked in a breath. One of her hands drifted over his midsection, her fingers resting all too close to his twitching cock.

“Three,” he whispered harshly through gritted teeth. “She makes me forget finesse, makes me lose control.” And a loss of control hit

Marcus where it really hurt.

"Four," Tessa rasped in a sexy voice, "she's too aggressive." Her hand wrapped around his pulsing girth and began priming him. "She makes me come even when I don't want to."

Marcus groaned as her long fingers stroked the underside of his shaft. She tightened her grip around him and began pumping, playing on the sensitivity of his cock like an expert. Harder and faster she jerked, watching him with intense blue eyes, taking him that much closer to climax.

"Tessa," he gasped, almost leaping off the bed when she bit lightly at one of his nipples. "*Sertia*, please."

He didn't know what he wanted more, to come into her hand or lose himself in the addicting taste of her sex, to bury his head between her thighs and make her scream with desire.

But his decision was taken out of his hands when she let go of him and slithered down his body, taking him in her mouth.

Lights flashed behind his lids and a wave of heat swam over him. Sweat broke out over his brow as she sucked hard, swallowing the milky beginnings of his orgasm. Her tongue swept up and down his shaft, settling over the underside of his crown as she stroked him into ecstasy.

"Fuck, Tessa," he groaned as the wave crashed, sweeping him into oblivion. He pulsed and shuddered into her mouth, aware of her groans as she swallowed him.

The act was so intimate, so overwhelmingly giving that he finally gave up and surrendered.

"I love you, you know that?" He sighed, wishing he could recall his legendary romantic reputation around Tessa. So much for poetry and flowers. Even in Tanselm the women wanted loving words and a romantic setting.

"I know," she whispered back, kissing her way up his body. "It took you long enough to admit it."

He frowned, too tired to see her face but irritated all the same. She should have returned the sentiment, not berated him for saying it.

"But I forgive you." She sounded amused.

"You forgive me?" he repeated, his displeasure growing. For some odd reason she always seemed to spark his temper, and this after a mind-blowing orgasm.

"I do," she whispered against his lips. He stiffened and groaned when she thrust her tongue inside his mouth, awash in his taste mingled with her scent. "And I'd be pleased to be your *affai* and marry you."

"Pleased—" He was too stunned to respond for a moment. Had the woman just accepted a proposal he hadn't yet made?

“Of course, I’m not sure you mean it. Maybe you should convince me I should say yes?” she suggested playfully, reaching for his hand and placing it between her slick thighs. “Hmm, yes. Show me what I’ll be missing if I say no.”

Caught in her sensual web, he was helpless to deny her. He sucked and licked, nipped and tasted all of her from her forehead to her toes. And then he settled at the apex of her thighs for a long, leisurely feast.

Soon she was caught in his spell, completely at his mercy as he made her beg for pleasure. Shortly after, as they rested together, Marcus groaned sleepily, knowing he’d never live it down if his brothers discovered his *affai* had proposed to him, and that he’d been seduced into accepting.

Chapter Twelve

“I don’t know how we’re going to flush out the Djinn,” Tessa said to Marcus the next day as they waited in morning traffic. “He, or she,” she added, willing to be an equal opportunity accuser, “could be anyone.”

“Exactly. Anyone, as in Jonas Chase.”

She exhaled loudly and rolled her eyes. He was being deliberately obtuse, but she didn’t have the heart to be mad at him. Still flying on cloud nine, she couldn’t believe she’d had the nerve to seduce him into a proposal, one that he’d accepted.

Fully expecting him to dismiss her ‘teasing’ in the light of day, she was amazed when at breakfast he informed Aerolus she’d agreed to marriage. Aerolus, bless him, had merely nodded, as if he’d accepted the fact days ago.

Cadmus had been asleep, but she knew the next time she saw him he’d be full of sly innuendo and knowing grins.

“You can think it’s Jonas if it will make you happy.” She patronised him but he only grinned and winked.

“I will, and I am happy.” Charm oozed out of every pore. Marcus was his most formidable when pleased. “You make me very happy, *affai*.” His eyes blazed, and an immediate warmth pooled in her loins.

She cleared her dry throat and shifted in her seat, aware of his smug male satisfaction.

“And you make me hard,” he continued in a thick voice. “Heavy and throbbing when your mouth covers my cock.” He continued the sex talk all the way to the building, leaving them both breathing hard and wanting when he turned off the engine of his BMW in the parking lot.

“You expect us to both go into work now, like this?” she gasped.

He smiled and adjusted his trousers. “That’s all I have time for now, *sertia*. I’ll give you what you’re craving later, hmm? Be good and stay away from Jonas, will you?” He brushed her lips with his own and left the car, waiting by her door.

Still breathing hard, she gave him credit for being a devious bastard. She knew Marcus’ moods and how to manipulate him, but he knew her buttons as well. Apparently, he thought to use passion to control her. Damned if it wasn’t working.

She took a deep breath, fussed with her jacket and left the car. “Pretty slick,” she complimented.

“I know,” he said with a quick glance at her groin. “But we’ll get to that later.”

She frowned at how easily he’d mastered her and resolved not to

be so easy next time. But thoughts of next time only added to her sexual frustration, so she focused on the real trouble bothering her. Preceding him into work, she wasn't sure what to do now that her office nemesis had been ferreted. If only they had a way to discover the Djinn as well.

Stepping out of the elevator to the eighth floor, they entered Tomanna's foyer and went their separate ways, he to his office and she to hers. An hour passed before she joined the morning logistics meeting where Michael Davis waited with a hateful, lust-filled gaze. One eye had a large bruise under it and his upper lip was swollen. He looked as if he wanted to say something to her, but he kept his distance and remained tight-lipped with animosity.

Jonas shrugged, a glint of humour tingeing his gaze, and she studied him surreptitiously while the meeting progressed. Aside from being uncommonly attractive, she didn't see anything different about him than she'd been seeing since she started at Tomanna.

"I'm sorry, Tessa, are we boring you?" Davis asked with an icy politeness.

"As a matter of fact—"

"Thank you, Michael," Jonas finished, glaring her into silence. "I think your take on Surell is what we all had in mind." The others nodded. "Now, to continue to our newest accounts..."

Tessa nodded and made notes for the next half hour. Tomanna would have to take precedence just now since she had so much work to do, and no thoughts at all on the Djinn. "Best to work with what you've got," she murmured to herself, gathered her things and headed out the door with the rest of the staff when the meeting adjourned.

The day progressed with an almost disturbing tedium, databases and spreadsheets taking up the majority of her time. She missed lunch, *again*, opting for a candy bar Jonas found in his office, and sat through the last half of her day with him, restructuring their present accounts.

"Storm sure brings us a lot of business," Jonas said casually before rattling off another stream of data for Tessa to input into the computer.

Tessa stopped typing. "What did you say?"

"Only that Storm is as good as they say." He shook his head, his gaze glued to the papers on his desk, making it unable to read the emotion in his eyes. "I didn't think a hotshot from nowhere would garner us two of the biggest accounts in the northwest, and that was before the Ryder deal."

"Your point?" she asked softly, willing him to meet her gaze.

He did, but showed her nothing. "You know, when I first assigned you to oversee his accounts, I was hoping for some spark between the

two of you.” She stared in surprise. “He’s the office playboy, and you give off ‘don’t touch me’ signals all the time. I wanted to see what would happen.”

“Jonas?” What the hell was he talking about?

“It was presumptuous of me, I’m sorry.” He sounded earnest, but she just couldn’t read his face. And that bothered her. “But you work too hard, Tessa. I wanted you to have some fun with life.” He flushed and she blinked. “I see a lot of myself in you. Maybe that’s why we never hit it off, you and me, I mean.”

“Jonas, I—”

“Admit it, Tessa. I have women throwing themselves at me all the time, not that I’m bragging.” He grinned, a lighthearted expression that made him seem years younger. “From the minute you started working for me I felt a physical attraction for you but little else. And you never once gave me any indication you felt anything but friendship towards me.”

She blushed, uncomfortable yet fascinated at this personal discussion with Jonas. “I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s just it. You always know what to say. But lately with Storm, you’re different.” He sounded concerned. “I wanted you and Storm to hit it off. He seemed like a nice guy. He’s smart and supposedly decent, if you know which stories to listen to.” He grimaced. “And speaking of rumours, Davis is one source you won’t have to worry about anymore. Which brings me to my point. The way Storm jumped all over Davis made me think maybe you and he are somewhat, ah, involved?”

“Well, I, he,” she flubbed. It was none of Jonas’ business, yet his concern was palpable, and even endearing.

“I’m sorry for butting in, but I think of you as a friend and someone I care about. In a purely platonic sense,” he added hastily. “I just don’t want to see you hurt, Tessa. And especially not because of something I did. If you like Storm, that’s your business. But if he’s making you uncomfortable, I’d be more than happy to talk to him, the way I did Davis this morning.”

And Marcus thought Jonas was the Djinn. A man who was turning beet red because he’d set her up with the office ‘playboy’. She shook her head and smiled.

“Marcus and I are friends, Jonas. It’s nothing you have to worry about.” She sighed. “Frankly, I was putting too much belief into the rumours about him and finally confronted him about it. If anyone would have talked to me the way I talked to him, I probably would have decked him. But not Marcus. He’s a real gentleman.” *Who can steal my breath with a look.* “Now, I’ll grant you he’s a bit arrogant.”

Jonas gave her a look that clearly said *understatement*.

“Okay, a lot arrogant. But to be fair, he’s earned the conceit when it comes to business.” And *loving*, she couldn’t help inwardly admitting. “And decking Davis, that makes him more than special in my book.”

Jonas chuckled, seeming relieved. “I agree to that. I’ve already counseled Davis once about his interactions with some of the female staff, and have been meaning to have another talk with him about harassment, even though you refused to nail him for it the last time we discussed this,” he reprimanded subtly. “But Storm beat me to the punch, literally.”

Tessa grinned, then sobered as a thought occurred to her. “Has Davis complained at all about what Marcus did to him?”

“No. I think if he did, he’d have to explain just who beat him up and why. No one around here has ever questioned Storm, except for you, of course. And now, apparently, the man doesn’t have one person on his bad side except Davis.”

Tessa nodded absently, wondering why she was feeling as if someone had just walked over her grave.

Jonas shook his head and gave her a rueful grin. “I’m a fool for bringing any of this up. I know you have an older brother to look out for you, it’s just that we work together and you’re so,” he paused.

“So what?” she asked, both curious and pleased.

“Hell, Tessa. You’re gorgeous and strong, and strangely vulnerable when no one’s looking,” he said quietly. “And now I’ve made you uncomfortable again. I’m sorry.” He rolled his eyes. “Forget I said anything about any of this. In fact, grab your stuff and go home for the day. You’ve been working your *ass* off for weeks now. Get out of here.”

She sighed, relieved her non-PC boss had finally returned. “My *ass* is only too happy to oblige,” she said with a huff and stood. “And I refuse to feel guilty about leaving since there’s only one more sheet to input.”

“Yeah,” he said smugly. “That’s why I’m being such a great boss about letting you leave early. Because you’ve already finished ninety-nine percent of the work.”

Tessa laughed and left him busy by his computer. Nodding to several coworkers, she chatted her way to her office when she was waylaid by Judy.

“Tessa, I need a favour,” Judy said breathlessly, as if she’d been running.

“Sure, Judy, what do you need?” Tessa asked cautiously as Judy followed her into her office. Did the woman want her to plate Marcus’ name in gold and hang it above the employee of the year plaque in

the foyer? Or maybe she wanted Tessa to coordinate a Be-Nice-To-Marcus day.

Judy looked both left and right, as if someone might possibly be lurking in Tessa's empty office, and closed the door behind her to ensure privacy. "Mr. Conklin is expecting a very important and confidential package that right now is waiting in the lobby. The private courier can't come up here with it due to information we learned today."

Judy glanced over her shoulder at the closed door before leaning forward to whisper, "We have a corporate spy here in Tomanna."

Tessa could feel the blood drain from her face. *It was starting. Shit. Covington was fired, out of the picture. How was this happening?*

"You're kidding," she said, her eyes wide with real shock.

Judy nodded furiously. "I only wish I were. Mr. Conklin is stunned and very, very upset, I don't have to tell you. As of this moment, the only people he trusts around here are me, Marcus, Jonas and you. And since the rest of us are busy, I was hoping you could grab the package. I would but I'm already late for Mr. Conklin's yearly analysis overview. Damn," she swore as she noted the clock above Tessa's head.

"Sure, I'll get it." Tessa felt as if she were swimming. Her thoughts floated, just out of reach, keeping her from thinking rationally. Visions of a jail cell and handcuffs reverberated through her mind.

"Oh, thank you," Judy gushed and turned to the door. "One more thing, the courier is downstairs in the lobby wearing a ball cap and a heavy, denim jacket. Sounds very double-oh-sevenish, I know, but this deal could net us millions if we play it right, and that means keeping mum to our competitors." She grimaced. "That we have to stoop to disguises and secrets is ridiculous. If it weren't for Mr. Conklin's insistence on discretion, I'd call the police right now."

"Right." Tessa coughed nervously. "Let me get to it, then."

Judy nodded and left, and Tessa wanted to run to Marcus with her questions. The idea made her frown. Since when had she needed a man to solve her problems? Granted, this situation was unique, but Judy was talking about company intrigue, not wraiths and Djinn.

Tessa rolled her eyes. No, going to Marcus right now was definitely out. If she so much as mentioned the word 'threat', he'd simply point the finger at Jonas and demand answers, answers her concerned friend didn't have. Judy had said Marcus was busy anyway. This worry could keep until later, if she wasn't arrested in the meantime. Sighing, she left her office and headed for the elevators.

When she reached the lobby, she found it heavily trafficked with people leaving for the day. "Nice to be able to leave at four, like I was

supposed to,” she muttered, trying to find the courier. Hell, she *felt* like a spy picking up Conklin’s ‘package’ in the damned building lobby.

A black ball cap and denim jacket caught her eye and she angled towards the front of the crowded lobby.

“Excuse me, is that for Mr. Conklin?” she asked the tall man with his back to her. He turned and she froze, aware of a sudden humming in her blood. The man was drop-dead gorgeous, with dark hair, a strong nose and firm lips that grinned at the sight of her. His eyes remained a mystery, covered by black sunglasses. Yet something about him was familiar, for all that he looked like a stranger.

“It’s about time,” he said, his voice deep with satisfaction.

“Sorry I was late, but—”

“It’s been a while, but we’ve met.” ‘Sin Garu stepped out from behind the man with a polite grin and her heart pounded so hard she thought it might explode.

The sorcerer wore a conservative grey suit, his hair cut fashionably short, his teeth bright white but no longer sharp and he carried a briefcase—the image of a typical corporate shark. “Don’t worry about the package, Tessa. Conklin doesn’t really need it, and Davis here, well, he wanted some time alone with you. And from the way you and Marcus have treated him, it’s no wonder.”

At five ‘til six, his last meeting for the day wrapped up and Marcus went in search of Tessa. Spying her coat and portfolio still sitting on her desk, he shook his head. He’d warned her earlier he’d be late, and told her to call Cadmus to drive her home.

Most of the floor was deserted, with the exception of Jonas Chase’s office. Bastard. Marcus seethed as he cut across the floor. Knocking politely when he wished to pound down the door, he had just decided to give Chase a piece of his mind for keeping Tessa late when the door opened.

A weary looking Chase blinked. “Yes?”

“I’m looking for Tessa.”

“Tessa? She left hours ago. You haven’t by chance seen Davis out there, have you?” Jonas looked beyond him.

Marcus tensed. “What do you mean she left hours ago?”

Jonas paused, apparently seeing something in Marcus’ stance that made him wary. “I let her go around four. She’s been working so hard lately. Are you sure she’s not still here?”

“Her coat is in her office.” Marcus shook his head. “I’ll check upstairs.”

“I’ll go with you,” Jonas offered.

About to deny him, Marcus changed his mind at the last instant.

Better to have your enemies close, he thought. Except that for an enemy, Jonas looked surprisingly concerned about Tessa. In fact, he wore a pinched expression, as if he too feared the worst.

They walked quickly up the stairs and found only a few executives working, Tessa nowhere in sight. After checking and rechecking the opposite stairwells, they returned to Tessa's office and studied the area, searching for some hint she'd recently been there.

Then Jonas cursed. "I hate to think this might have anything to do with it, but Michael Davis is late on some correspondence I needed, and he hasn't answered his phone since a little after three."

Marcus fisted his hands. "Davis, as in the little asshole I knocked into the wall yesterday?"

Jonas nodded, his eyes full of concern. "The same. I'm probably way off base, here, right?"

"Probably."

"Look, I have more work to do. I'll stick around here for a while, just in case she shows."

"Here's my cell number," Marcus said as he wrote it down and handed Jonas a slip of paper. "I'm going home in case she's headed there already." But Cadmus or Tessa would have called him by now. "Call me if you see her before I do."

Jonas nodded. "Can do."

"And Chase?" Marcus paused, aware he might have made a mistake about the man. "Thanks."

The minute Jonas left, Marcus reached for the phone. "Cadmus, Aerolus, pick up," he muttered, wishing he had a touch of Darius' telepathy. What he wouldn't give now to be reading Tessa's mind, to know she was safe at home and all his worry was for naught.

"Yo?"

"Cadmus," Marcus growled, "is Tessa there?"

"No, why?"

"Because I'm standing in her office and she's not here. She's not anywhere in Tomanna, and I've got a really bad feeling."

"Hold on." Cadmus bellowed for Aerolus, and suddenly his brother appeared in the office.

"When did you last see her?" Aerolus asked calmly, while every nerve in Marcus' body pulsed, adrenaline surging through his blood on wings of fear.

"I saw her at noon today, but according to her boss she's been gone since four."

"Two hours." Aerolus pondered that while Cadmus swore over the phone in several different languages.

"Cadmus?" Marcus asked. "What's wrong?"

"A vision," he rasped, "just whacked me upside the head. It's the

Djinn, Marcus, he's got her. And he's not alone."

Chapter Thirteen

Tessa wanted to throw up, the presence of evil around her was so strong. But she held onto a nerve of steel, knowing Marcus would sooner die than show ‘Sin Garu a hint of fear. If the River Prince could do it, then by God his *affai* could be as brave. And the hot-tempered redhead inside her refused to back down.

Besides, looking bored drove Michael Davis crazy. The stupid, egocentric Djinn. Staring at him as he glared at her, she superimposed this face, the pretty one, over the ugly, narcissistic, gnome-like mask she’d traded insults with for the past six months.

“You have no idea how much I itched wearing that short, ugly little costume of a man,” Davis said, his voice no longer nasal, but deep and commanding. He shot her an assessing leer.

Well, not everything about him had changed.

“Were it not for my lord ‘Sin Garu, I’d have fucked you ten ways from tomorrow and made you bleed, and bleed some more.” He chuckled, his words all the more disgusting coming from such a handsome mouth. She should have known better, but Tessa had a hard time putting his gorgeous looks together with such an obscene personality.

And speaking of obscene...she turned to note the notorious ‘Sin Garu staring at her unblinkingly from just a few feet away.

They occupied a cramped living room belonging to Davis, the inhuman Djinn capable of becoming anyone. She’d almost lost her last meal, that pitiful candy bar Jonas had given her earlier, when he changed into the old Davis right before her eyes in the car.

His skin had melted like wax, his bones crunching and breaking as if in the maw of a monster, and he’d reformed slowly and with a large amount of mess, as evidenced by the blood-soaked car seat. Uncaring in the slightest, once changed he’d escorted both her and the sorcerer to his mangy apartment in Freemont. Once inside, he’d changed back, bloodily, making her want to cringe.

“Why not let me taste the prize, my lord?” Davis asked ‘Sin Garu with surprising deference. “I promise to leave few scars, just enough to ensure her worthiness to the great and future king of Tanselm.”

She snorted, unable to resist. “Why don’t you just kiss his ass already and get it over with?”

Death surely stared at her through Michael Davis’ eyes, but his extreme irritation did a small part to soothe that piece of her needing to hurt him in any way possible. She’d disliked Davis from day one, and now she knew why.

‘Sin Garu laughed at Davis’ boiling rage. “Well, Michael, I’ll agree

she's a pleasure to look at, even for an awkward *xiantope*. Oh, I'm sorry, Tessa, how rude. *Xiantope* is what we call those of you from the primitive, non-magic worlds."

He nodded at Davis. "She has a knack for reading people, ferreting their strengths and weaknesses. She had you pegged from the beginning." The sorcerer smiled, showing too many teeth. "Well, she didn't know what you were, but she knew enough of you to be wary, didn't she?"

Davis clenched his jaw tight and took another step towards Tessa.

"She bothers you, doesn't she?" 'Sin Garu baited, but Davis only shrugged. "Oh, what the hell. You've earned it, and I daresay I'll enjoy watching the two of you. Such unfettered beauty," he muttered, his eyes dark with what Tessa could only describe as hunger.

The fear she'd successfully been suppressing bubbled to the surface when she read the sheer pleasure on Davis' face.

"Strip, *melea*," he sneered.

"*Melea* means whore," 'Sin Garu translated.

"Thanks for being so helpful," she snapped, using every bit of anger in her to overcome the fear making her knees shake. Though she'd been obnoxious to both of them since they'd spirited her out of the lobby doors, neither had lifted a hand to touch or harm her, yet.

"If you wanted me to strip you, *melea*, all you had to do was ask," Davis said and drew closer, his intent to hurt her plain on his face.

"Get back, you freak. I'll do it." She glared at him and slowly removed her hair pins. *Stall, stall. Marcus, where the hell are you?*

"Ah, such fire, such magnificent tresses," 'Sin Garu said with a sigh. "I like it better down."

"Yeah." Davis sneered. "That way when you're on your knees sucking me off, I can manage your head with those sleek red reins."

Apparently, his crudity excited the sorcerer, for a brilliant lust flared in 'Sin Garu's eyes, and the bulge between his thighs became prominently visible.

Great, Tessa thought, terrified and trying to hold it back. Rape by two evil creatures was certainly worse than by one. *How the hell am I going to get out of this?*

She didn't have long to wait on her answer. The minute Davis lunged at her, the moment his hand touched her flesh, a film of water rushed from her shoulder to cover his hand and every pore of his body. He coughed and gagged, struggling to breathe as he fell to his knees. But the water would not relent. A thin sheet, it looked almost like a wrapping of cellophane in which Davis had become entangled, except that it moved and shimmered like an unearthly spa wrap.

She watched in horror as Davis choked to death on water that appeared from out of nowhere. Instinctively, she knew she had Marcus

to thank for the show.

“Very impressive.” ‘Sin Garu nodded, pleased. “I hadn’t expected such dramatic fanfare, a simple protection spell would have sufficed. But Marcus outdid himself.”

Tessa stared at him, still coming to grips with the now-dead Djinn on the floor. Davis lay staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, his mouth bubbling into the thin film that had suffocated him to death.

“You knew something like this would happen?” She turned to ‘Sin Garu.

He shrugged. “Why not? I would have done the same in Marcus’ place. Apparently he’s claimed you.” He stared at her, his eyes seeming to glow for a brief moment. “And you’ve accepted him. Tsk, tsk. I’m disappointed in you, Tessa. I didn’t expect you to be so easy.”

She flushed and he grinned, a dark smile that sent shudders down her spine. He looked hungry, and despite his monstrous fangs and clear intent to hurt and no doubt kill her, his power was incredibly seductive. She shivered. How she could find anyone as horrible as ‘Sin Garu appealing was beyond her comprehension, and the longer she stared, the wider he smiled, as if he understood her dilemma.

“Have no worries, Tessa,” he said gently and stood, stretching out his long limbs. “I won’t hurt you, much.” He approached until he stood a hair’s breadth from her. Reaching out a long, pointed finger, he ran the nail parallel to her cheek, close but not touching.

He seemed pleased when she clenched her jaw and refused to glance away. “I’m really going to enjoy you, Tessa.” He sounded surprised. “But we have much to do before we can succumb to pleasure. First I need to see what you and the Storm Lords are really made of.”

Striving to overcome her fear, she focused her nervous energy on ‘Sin Garu, imagining shoving him hard against the wall and away from the door. She could feel energy pulsing around her, a conscious effort to use the telekinesis that dwelled within Marcus, but to her disappointment nothing happened.

‘Sin Garu, however, looked entirely too pleased. “Excellent. You’ve harnessed outside psychic abilities, just as I had suspected. But I wonder just how much elemental power you’ve absorbed from the Storm Lords.” He reached forward until his palm was a whisper away from touching her cheek, then stopped. “But not here. There’s not enough room.” He shook his head. His expression turned crafty and he pointed at the door. “Run, Tessa. Just to make it interesting, let’s see how fast and far you can go before I find you.”

She wasn’t about to waste the opportunity. Without a backward glance, she threw open the front door and vaulted out into... nothingness.

Marcus flashed back to the house with Aerolus, his heart beating so strenuously he prayed he'd live long enough to save Tessa from 'Sin Garu.

"I really hate teleporting." He glared at Aerolus, knowing he had no right to snap at his brother, but his anger kept him just this side of sane. "Cadmus," he roared.

"I'm right here." Cadmus appeared in the foyer sounding as annoyed and discomfited as Marcus felt. "Quit shouting, you're only adding to my headache."

"Cadmus," Aerolus warned, apparently seeing what Cadmus was too dense to realise.

Striving hard to keep himself in control of his emotions lest he flood and destroy everything in his sight, Marcus stared directly into his brother's brown eyes. "Where. Is. She?" he asked in measured tones.

Cadmus' eyes widened. "Damn it, cut it out, you're seriously spooking me."

Everything around Marcus looked hazy, and eerily, distortingly blue. It was as if the world in which he stood existed, but was buffered by a wall of murky, pulsing water, a liquid world of life and death. He focused his will and his vision cleared, though he still felt as if he stood in water.

"Take me to her, brother," he commanded Aerolus, conscious his voice sounded off, muffled.

"Control it, Marcus, until you know when to release it," Aerolus said quietly. "You're more powerful now than you've ever been, and you're going to need it. Unfortunately, we can't summon Arim or Darius. Don't ask questions, there's no time. I'll explain it all later, after we've rescued Tessa. Both of you, take my hands." Marcus and Cadmus grabbed him. "Whatever you do, Cadmus, let Marcus lead today."

"No problem." Cadmus stared at Marcus with both pride and awe. "Now that waterboy's back in control, with any luck, he'll kill the sorcerer and you and I can go home without any *affai*. Ow." He glared at their joined hands, then at Aerolus. "What the hell was that for?"

"Focus on the now, Cadmus. Tessa's life is in danger."

Cadmus grimaced. "We all know that, Aerolus. But thanks again for pointing that out. Don't worry, Marcus," he said seriously. "One way or the other, your *affai* will leave in one piece with you."

Marcus nodded, aware Cadmus meant it—that he would sacrifice himself, if need be, to save Tessa and Marcus. "As long as Tessa is safe, that's all that matters." His eyes glinted as he stared at his

siblings, the men he loved with an intensity that could never be described by mere words. “Be careful, and if I tell you to step back and let me handle the sorcerer, do it.”

Expecting Cadmus to argue, he was surprised when his brother merely nodded. “Well,” Marcus said with a deep breath, his voice sure even if a small part of him teetered on uncertainty, “let’s go.”

Would the pain never stop? Tessa clutched her aching head and glared at ‘Sin Garu, who looked none too pleased with her either.

“If you don’t engage the next one before it reaches that line, I’ll let it and its brethren have you. Really, Tessa, these sentiments of morality are aggravating in the extreme.” He pointed at her and murmured something, and Tessa’s skull felt as it would split in two. “Do as I command, unless you’d rather we retire early?” His expression turned thoughtful as he studied her body from top to bottom, his eyes coming to rest on her breasts.

Stifling an instinctive shudder, she said through clenched teeth, “Fine, I’ll do it. But you’d better pray I never get loose. The minute you turn your back you’re a dead man.”

As soon as the words left her mouth she knew her angry bravado had been a mistake. The sorcerer laughed, the first sincere chuckle she’d heard while in his presence. Then he neared her and leaned close. His breath was both sweet and repulsive, as if it contained whispers of corruption amidst promises of unimaginable desire.

“I’m grateful for the warning, *melea*,” he said softly and grabbed a hunk of her hair, gripping it in one enormously strong hand. Unlike the Djinn, ‘Sin Garu encountered no repercussions from touching her since arriving in this place, wherever *this* was. She, however, felt burned with cold where his fingers touched her scalp. “When I’m burrowed deep inside that delectable body, then we’ll see how much you really care.” He yanked her neck to the side and licked her just under her ear, making her whimper at the soul-numbing pain.

“What’s wrong, *melea*? Don’t you like my touch?” His grip on her hair tightened for a moment before he pushed her away. “Now meet the wraith and draw on its energies unless you want a true taste of my desire.”

Shivering in the gloomy, rock-walled chamber, she nodded just to get him away from her. Seeing her compliance, he stepped back and resumed his seat in a massive red chair that reminded her uneasily of a throne. Sibilant whispers sounded from the dark while flashes of movement surrounded her. Save for the single torch directly over her head, floating there courtesy of ‘Sin Garu, the rest of the large room lay in shadows and darkness.

The sorcerer raised one brow, awaiting her interaction with the

approaching monstrosity. Angry with herself for being such a wuss, she nevertheless had no desire to step anywhere near the sorcerer. She'd take her chances with the wraith. While she could stand 'Sin Garu's threats and even the migraine-like headaches his experiments and spells produced, touching him had been a like a window into her own version of hell.

The wraith approached, commanding her attention, its bald head unsteady on its papery-thin neck. It looked unnervingly like a skeleton with too many vertebrae. Like the others she'd been forced to encounter, this wraith also had yellow and black mottled skin, large white eyes without pupils or irises, and a mouth of sharp, black, shark-like teeth.

"I'm going to digest you for the next three days," it hissed softly and began weaving in front of her, a riveting dance of intricate steps that transfixed her as it scuttled closer. Dangerously closer. Before it could do any damage, however, she drew on the memory of Marcus, the talisman she'd been warding thus far in her trip to Twilight Hell. To this point it had worked. The love she felt for him overwhelmed all other feeling, leaving her able to defend and defeat her attackers, with the exception of 'Sin Garu.

Not wanting to dwell on his obvious threat and praying for Storm Lord intervention before the sorcerer turned his personal attention on her again, she focused on the ravenous wraith before her, opening herself to absorb its energy.

At once her fascination with its dance stopped and a fierce need to kill overtook her. Like falling into a vat of oil, the sensation of contamination oozed over her every pore. She felt a hunger fiercer than the other creatures she'd been forced to combat, and the need to contain that hunger increased the power she squeezed inside.

"No, no, no," the sorcerer said with disgust. "I want you to let it all out. Or as you pitiful *xiantopes* would say, stop fucking around." His arctic blue glare promised retribution if she failed to comply.

It was a wraith, after all, she told herself. Should she fail, it would, as it promised, devour her. Still, the idea of taking a life felt wrong. She knew it was necessary, but the thought of destroying a living being left her feeling decidedly tainted, as if by killing others, even in self-defence, she had somehow crossed to the dark side.

With more a groan than growl, she let go of her inhibitions and proceeded to destroy the creature intent on her annihilation. She directed a wealth of the wraith's energy immediately back on itself, using its own hunger to ravage its strength until it fell to its hands and knees.

Wielding telekinesis as if born to the task, she mentally pummeled the wraith across the stone floor and against the walls,

unable to stem the dark energy seething within her, begging for release. A high-pitched squeal sounded as she threw the wraith over 'Sin Garu's throne. It must have hit someone, or *something*, that loitered in the chamber.

Unfortunately, the bloodied wraith, now her weapon, continued to pound at the creatures that peeked between the shadows, the wraith's destructive energies causing her to use it as such. Inhuman shrieks and screams abounded in the dark, mixing with the sorcerer's sinister laughter. Tessa felt like a prisoner in a madhouse.

When the wraith was no more than a lump of bloody pulp, like the other wraiths she'd unwillingly decimated, she released it at 'Sin Garu's feet. And similar to the other casualties, this body was soon ripped apart and devoured by hazy, spider-like creatures that appeared out of nowhere.

Soon only a stain remained where the wraith had lain, and the reality of her battles settled heavily upon her. The confusing feelings of both triumph and disgust, excitement and weariness, warred for supremacy, making Tessa exhausted all at once. She wavered on her feet, and not surprisingly, her strength left her as suddenly as it had come. Stumbling, she fell hard on her knees, gasping at the pain.

"Not again." 'Sin Garu snorted with disgust. "For months you refused to succumb to a Storm Lord, ignoring both his obvious sexuality and magical allure. Your tenacity against Marcus showed an inner strength I've yet to see here."

He grimaced, his beautiful features pinched, yet in no way ugly. "How can you wield such power against the wraiths and be so weak afterward, when you have the potential to be so much greater?" He seemed to be talking as much to himself as to her, and she had to focus on his face to keep it from blurring.

Squatting down to meet her at eye level, he put a hand under her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. "Tessa?" he said softly, making her wish she had the energy to worry about what he wanted now.

"What?" she rasped, praying he would soon tire of his games, simultaneously longing for and dreading Marcus' arrival. She loved him, wanted him near, but didn't want him in danger. Not at the hands of this merciless devil who wanted nothing more than to make Marcus suffer.

'Sin Garu reached for her hands and slowly brought her to her feet. It was agony to stand, her mind splintering at the effort to hold herself apart from him when she needed so much to lean on someone. As before, where he touched her she felt bone-numbing cold, but as miserable as she was, the small pain was more an afterthought.

"Tessa," he began, staring deep into her eyes with an intensity that alarmed her. "I fear I've gone about this entirely wrong." He

broke contact to walk around her, eying her from different angles. She refused to follow him, knowing to do so would have her crumbling to the grungy floor.

He smiled and inwardly she flinched. “You’re an intelligent woman, and much more aggressive than the Prince of Fire’s *affai*. Perhaps if I explain a few things, you’ll understand why I appear to be in the wrong, when in fact, I and my people are the injured party here.”

She blinked in astonishment. Did he seriously think she would listen to anything he said with an open mind after torturing her for what felt like days?

“Sit.” He motioned to a chair that suddenly appeared at her back and nudged at her knees. Dropping into it, she waited, trying like hell to regain her strength.

“You know only what the Storm Lords have told you, and in my error I treated you like one of them, even knowing you should not be held accountable for your ignorance.”

Oh, gee, thanks for being so noble. Does that mean you’re not going to rape and kill me now? She bit her lip, wanting to light into him but for once refusing to give in to her temper.

“The Storm Lords are but one facet of Tanselm’s history. The true believers, the ones who made Tanselm what it is today, a world of magic and promise, are the Dark Lords.”

“Dark Lords?”

He nodded, seeming to appear thoughtful. But the conniving glint lurking in his gaze gave him away. What did he hope to accomplish by telling her any of this? According to Marcus and his brothers, most humans from a world with ‘no magic’ weren’t worthy of the great ‘Sin Garu’s time. Just her luck he found her interesting.

“The Dark Lords were my people, and we once ruled Tanselm. Warriors, sorcerers, healers and academics. People like the Light Bringers, people like you, even. Our scholars, in fact, are still mentioned in the Light Bringer texts as men and women of great renown.”

She blinked, not having expected ‘Sin Garu to sound so matter-of-fact, as if he were reciting a passage from a history text. The minute he’d said Dark Lords, she’d imagined a legion of wraiths and worse tearing up Tanselm.

“And the wraiths?”

“Unfortunate souls trapped in the tug of war between the Dark and the Light. They were once as you and I, but encountered a dreaded curse, and today they are only as wraith.”

“The *Netharat*.”

He scowled. “What the Storm Lords call those diseased with

madness. I control them through spells and thought, because I thought I might find a place for them in our world. But the Storm Lords call them foul beings and evil creatures, because of the way they feed and their preference for the dark.

“They cannot help that they need flesh and blood to survive. The curse brought them to this. But they were innocent bystanders in a battle that should only have affected the lords of Dark and Storm.” Icy rage resounded through his voice, and despite her belief ‘Sin Garu was trying to manipulate her, she could feel the real rage in him at what he said.

He raised his hands, in frustration, then supplication as he startled her with a simple apology. “I do not ask you to believe me. I’ve treated you so wrong, done to you what the Storm Lords have done to the *Netharat*.” He lowered his gaze, his lips flat. “I cannot express to you how sorry I am that my hatred brought me to this.”

Oddly enough, she was starting to feel a smidgen of compassion for him. There were two sides to every story, so perhaps there was more to Marcus’ tale than he and his brothers had shared with her. ‘Sin Garu seemed so sincere, and that scared the shit out of her.

He just put you through hours of torture killing those he supposedly pities, her conscious shouted. But a strange inability to differentiate truth from lie settled over her like a fog, clouding her sense of judgement.

Was the sorcerer using some sort of spell to make her indecisive? But if he could do that, why not just make her believe him and not Marcus?

“All of this must seem ridiculous in light of the way I’ve treated you. But had you come to me first, without the influence of the River Prince,” he said with disdain, “you might be fighting *with* me instead of *against* me. Darkness is not evil, light is not necessarily always good.” He paused, his white face gleaming under a sudden shimmering of light above him.

“The illumination is uncomfortable for me, but not because I am evil, but because of the way I’m made.” His eyes grew shuttered as he watched her. “You have probably been told the *Netharat*, like me, are evil. Wraiths, Shadren, even the Djinn, I suppose.”

Shadren? Great, another evil faction she hadn’t yet met?

“While Michael Davis was certainly unbalanced, not all Djinn are bad. The Djinn are a handsome race, intelligent, and unfortunately for them, more comfortable in the dark than in the light.”

He waved his hands and incanted under his breath, and suddenly she and he stood once again in Michael Davis’ stark living room. Davis’ body was nowhere in sight, but his house stank of death and

decay.

“Here we see the Djinn for what he was, an individual wanting to help me even the score against the Storm Lords. Yet all Djinn are not evil,” he ended quietly.

The front door banged open so suddenly Tessa shrieked in surprise. Expecting Marcus, she stared wide-eyed as Jonas charged through.

His eyes alight with fear and what looked like anger, he stared at her and ‘Sin Garu together before closing the door behind him.

“Tessa, come here to me,” he said calmly, not questioning the stranger behind her, or her presence in Davis’ home.

“You see,” ‘Sin Garu said softly as he moved to stand at her back. “Some Djinn are simply good men who care.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jonas took in the guarded look Tessa sent him, her comfortable posture with the evil one at her back, and knew ‘Sin Garu had done something to her mind.

Shit. He thought he’d been right to come here, but now he wondered if he hadn’t done wrong in not confiding in Marcus much sooner. If he had, maybe Tessa wouldn’t be here now. Maybe she and Marcus would have mated and moved back to Tanselm, where they both belonged. And maybe he would be one step closer to righting a terrible wrong instead of adding to that wrong.

“Jonas?” Tessa rasped. “A Djinn? No. Not you. Not you, Jonas.”

He shook his head and stepped forward, only to see the sorcerer smiling widely behind her.

“Yes, Jonas. Tell her the truth. Tell her all Djinn are not evil, that you aren’t here to harm her.”

“I’m not. Tessa,” he started, seeing her disbelief turn to outraged hurt. “I’m your friend, truly.” Anger consumed him as he glanced at ‘Sin Garu. “But he’s not. He’s going to kill you, devouring every bit of your power, body and soul before he’s through with the Storm Lords.”

“Oh, Jonas.” ‘Sin Garu shook his head and placed his hands on Tessa’s shoulders, holding her directly in front of him in a seemingly protective manner. “Not you too. Davis was fine in the beginning, but towards the end a madness consumed him, and I admit tainted me as well. But you seemed so strong... I can’t allow Tessa to be hurt again. I won’t.”

Tessa leant back into the sorcerer’s grasp, yet her eyes crinkled in confusion. *Yes, yes*, Jonas thought, focusing on her. *Look through the lies, see what your heart knows*. Picking up the threads of Davis’ power still lingering in the room, he wove dark energy through her, knowing it would leave her temporarily blinded and aching, but he was unable to fight ‘Sin Garu without her out of the way.

And where the hell were the Storm Lords? After looking for Tessa with Marcus at Tomanna, he’d transported himself to Davis’ and deliberately projected Tessa’s whereabouts to their seer before blowing open the door. At least one of Storm Lords, Cadmus, he thought, had to know Tessa was here.

As if thinking about them had summoned them, Marcus and his brothers suddenly appeared. Without a moment’s hesitation, they seemed to sum up the situation and the room lit with elemental power.

“Tessa?” Marcus asked quietly, his blue eyes blazing with fear and murderous rage, an emotion only a man in love would feel so strongly

seeing his bride limp in the arms of his enemy.

Marcus' eyes narrowed and Jonas watched, impressed, as the River Prince struggled to free his mate from 'Sin Garu, a silent, psychic battle of wills. But the sorcerer had no intention of releasing her alive. Pressing one elongated fingernail against her neck that grew until it drew blood, he warned Marcus back.

"Unless you're willing to hear me out, you'll get your precious *affai* back in pieces. Which would you like, Marcus? The head or the body?"

Marcus froze, his glare glacier blue. Jonas didn't need to be an empath to sense the frustration radiating from the man. He could only wait and hope the Storm Lord wouldn't do anything rash.

Sighing, he almost wished he and his cousin had traded assignments. The Prince of Fire had been a handful, and the Earth Lord was a definite challenge. But in Jonas' mind, neither prince compared to Marcus. Icy calm, collected and difficult to read, the River Prince had given him a headache from day one. Watching over Tessa Sheridan for six months hadn't helped matters either. He'd formed an attachment, a surprising friendship for the *trea*, one he knew would be the death of him.

Groaning, he looked at Marcus only to see the River Prince glowering his way. Hell. As if 'Sin Garu weren't enough to worry about, Marcus still didn't understand Jonas' place in all this. Apparently, the Earth Lord had yet to share it. A glimpse at Cadmus showed him nothing. Either Cadmus didn't believe him, didn't want to trust him, or hadn't understood what else Jonas had sent him before they'd arrived.

Further study of the Wind Mage, Aerolus, summed a communal *nothing*. The Storm brothers had collectively shut their minds to anyone but themselves, dammit. Jonas really could have used at least Aerolus' help on this, but hell, at this point, he had no choice but to take on 'Sin Garu.

The love Marcus felt for Tessa would stay her well. Both the Storm Lord and his *affai* were evenly matched, and if by chance they produced the next Tetrarch, life in Tanselm would prosper. The chance for a new Djinn way of life would still exist.

Jonas turned his full gaze back to 'Sin Garu to find the sorcerer looking smug. If *that one*, however, assumed the overking's throne, the Djinn would forever be ensorcelled, trapped beneath the weight of 'Sin Garu's long-reaching hands.

Gritting his teeth, Jonas gathered his power and the latent darkness around him, releasing Tessa from his thrall as he prepared himself for the pain sure to come. He couldn't afford to let 'Sin Garu have Tessa, and more than that, knew he didn't want to see the love

between her and Marcus destroyed.

“Hell,” he muttered, drawing everyone’s attention. “A little time spent among them and I’m turning soft.” And wrenching away his hold on this mortal form, he began to shimmer.

Marcus stared with shock as Jonas Chase, Tessa’s low-key boss, transformed into a glowing, dark-aura’d Djinn. The minute he did so, Aerolus teleported to Tessa and stole her out from ‘Sin Garu’s hold, too fast for the mortal eye to follow.

Aerolus deposited her behind a wall of elemental magic, a combination of his, Cadmus’ and Marcus’ protection, and behind a couch shielding her from the sight of the battle to come. Despite Marcus ordering him to leave with her, Aerolus refused to go.

“I’m needed more here, as is she.”

Marcus swore but faced his enemy steadily, knowing Aerolus would never do anything to intentionally harm Tessa.

More than angry at the Storm Lords’ interference, ‘Sin Garu hissed, raging profanity and curses upon Storm kin. He raised his hands, only to blink in surprise when a web of black enveloped them.

Everyone turned to Jonas, and Marcus couldn’t believe what he saw next. He’d seen Djinn in their true appearance, *in-truth* as they called it, only once before, during a legendary battle for the river region south of the eastern kingdom. That had been an extraordinary occurrence, and one witnessed from a league away. Now, however, Marcus had a front row seat.

Jonas kept a man’s form, yet where there was once flesh now burned a glittering, golden light surrounded by black flame.

The sight of a Djinn *in-truth* was eye-opening, no matter one’s experience with their kind. But what truly transfixed Marcus was not Jonas’ transformation, but his *attack on ‘Sin Garu*.

The Djinn pointed his hands at the sorcerer, his fingers outstretched, and a visible stream of dark matter surrounded and pushed through the sorcerer. ‘Sin Garu bellowed, looking stunned, and Marcus couldn’t believe the battle would end so easily.

It didn’t. Immediately wraiths appeared, at least a dozen, hissing and clawing as they surrounded their master, intercepting the Djinn’s attack. Jonas’ dark energy destroyed two of them, sucking what little bit of life they had left from the wraiths protecting ‘Sin Garu’s direct front.

In the split second after the wraiths arrived, Marcus shook free from his shock and let loose his power, flooding ‘Sin Garu with waves of destructive, pure telekinetic energy and flooding waters. His brothers joined him in the next breath.

Cadmus opened the ground beneath the nearest wraiths, shaking

the very foundation of the apartment floor apart, cement, brick and wood cracking and shifting as dark brown earth burrowed out of the ground below. The wraiths screeched for help, but their brethren were otherwise occupied fighting Marcus, Aerolus and one very angry Djinn.

Aerolus knocked several wraiths from his body with funnels of wind. "Marcus, behind you," he yelled as more wraiths appeared out of nowhere to surround them.

Conscious of Tessa lying unconscious only a few feet away and he and his brothers now outnumbered more than four to one, Marcus gave the barest of glances to the threat behind him before submerging all the wraiths he could see in individual films of water. Thoughts of Tessa and their love filled him with hope. The loss of his father gave him the strength to persevere, and the presence of his brothers forced him to accept his abilities and push them to the limit.

"Cadmus, Aerolus, stand back," he yelled before opening the floodgates.

Calling on Tanselm's vast stores of the life-giving water he called his own, Marcus pushed the waters from another plane altogether. His vision turned blue and he felt at one with his element, strong and surprisingly at peace. From his mouth, nose, eyes and pores streamed Tanselm's vengeance. Like a living tap, he provided the conduit of justice his world needed to restore balance.

"Holy shit," he dimly heard Cadmus murmur. Aerolus called his name, but he was aware only of Tessa and the sorcerer who threatened all she could be, all Tanselm could be. Time faded as he washed 'Sin Garu's wraiths into the Next, where they would be judged accordingly.

Panting after his exertions, he nevertheless felt more energized than weak after expelling so much force.

"Very impressive, water bringer," the sorcerer said calmly, as if he weren't struggling to find breath beyond the film of water that fought to seal his fate. But fight he did, despite the terrible winds and raging quakes that shook him.

"Deal with *that*, if you can," 'Sin Garu snarled before dissolving into fits of coughing.

Before Marcus could decipher his meaning, something grabbed him from behind and knocked the breath out of him. Slammed up into the ceiling and held there, he fought to turn himself around using every ounce of power he possessed.

"Mother of Shadow," Jonas whispered below him, staring at something beyond Marcus' very imagining.

"Let's see you defeat a *Nocumat*," 'Sin Garu said through strangled breath, his laughter threaded with madness.

A red puddle of liquid gelled on the floor below Marcus. At first a drop, it grew steadily until it was at least ten feet in diameter.

"You do not defeat a *Nocumat*," Aerolus spoke in a low voice. The puddle began to rise, a large shape morphing out of the sluggish substance. Hands appeared within it, growing from the puddle. Like a bloody outreach, they pointed in Marcus' direction. "Nor do you control one." He turned to 'Sin Garu. "Have you forgotten all you once learned from the Great Hall?"

'Sin Garu's smile shriveled and his eyes narrowed on the body now growing below Marcus. The body had taken Marcus' shape and face, though its dripping red flesh made it look like a wax mould of Marcus that stood too close to flame.

"It makes you think you can control it, but you can't," Aerolus whispered, moving closer to Marcus. "Only at the end of everything can it be contained."

"End of what?" Tessa slurred and stumbled to her feet behind the couch.

"Tessa, no," Marcus shouted, fear for her enabling him to break through 'Sin Garu's hold. He dropped to the floor, lying in the pool that was the *Nocumat*, and fought the pinpricks of pain that suddenly needled into his skin as the hands grabbed him, and the red image of himself leaned close.

"Marcus?" Tessa shook her head and stared wide-eyed around her. "Cadmus, Aerolus?" Then she caught sight of Jonas. "Oh, my God, Jonas. You're a Djinn!" But his flaming body had nothing on the bloody mess in front of her.

Marcus lay in its many-handed clutches like prey about to be devoured, his face pale and pinched with pain while a wax-like body loomed over him. *At least it wasn't a wraith again*, she thought hysterically, trying to convince herself this nightmare was nothing more than a bad dream.

Aerolus and Cadmus tried in vain to free him, and became just as contaminated by the red goo that acted scarily alive. Aerolus muttered under his breath, his forehead streaked with sweat as he closed his eyes and waved his hands as if conducting an orchestra. His spell slowed the *Nocumat's* progress, forcing several of the hands, if not the large body, to release Marcus and let Cadmus go. Now it crept instead of flowed over the Storm brothers.

Cadmus shook, his brown eyes black with pain as his skin suddenly flashed to gold and back again, black flames surrounding him in an almost mirror image of Jonas. Her eyes bulged. Was he turning Djinn?

She blinked rapidly, unable to process everything at once. Jonas,

her boss, looked like a man covered in flame, but she could see his face amidst the fire, no skin, just bright, white-gold light—and Cadmus could have been his twin. Aerolus, at least, looked like himself, only more intense as he battled with the red ‘man’, for lack of a better term, on the floor.

But Marcus...he appeared almost dead. She held the back of the couch in a death grip. “Marcus.” She felt helpless and weak and achingly lost at thoughts without him—and that vulnerability seriously pissed her off. “Tell me what to do.” Her eyes flickered to ‘Sin Garu, who by now had shed himself of the waters trying to drown him and stared from her to Marcus with murderous delight. He took a step in her direction.

Jonas intercepted him with a blast of what looked like vaporous black mist, diverting the sorcerer’s attention.

Marcus’ eyelids fluttered. “Take it, Tessa. Take all of it,” he rasped as water rushed from his body to free him from the red monster caging him. He lay on his side, one arm buried in the *Nocumat* while with his other he tried to escape with a tide of water.

Glancing up, he saw her and most likely ‘Sin Garu battling Jonas over her shoulder, and stopped. He thrust his elemental and psychic energy into her, and they immediately took root in her being, the taste and touch of Marcus now a piece of her. “Use it to defeat ‘Sin Garu,” he said hoarsely, sliding deeper into the red ooze. “Once he’s gone, the *Nocumat* will follow. It has to,” he muttered, sounding desperate. “Do it, now, before I’m unable to help you.”

She knew he’d seen ‘Sin Garu’s murderous intentions, knew too that he could have used his powers to free himself and then helped her to ward off the sorcerer since Jonas had him occupied.

“Get out of there, Marcus. Jonas and I can hold off ‘Sin Garu until you’re free.”

“No.”

Shocked, she blinked at him, astonished at how arrogant and authoritative he’d just sounded with a single ‘no.’

“I won’t have you battling ‘Sin Garu, not while I’m still breathing. I have to do this, Tessa. I left you to him once, I won’t do it again.” He groaned as one of the red hands seemed to reach into chest. “Aerolus, stop dicking around. Grab Cadmus and protect Tessa.”

Aerolus quirked a brow, still calmly chanting under his breath as he calmed the flames around Cadmus while stopping another of the *Nocumat*’s hands from wrapping around Marcus’ neck.

Tessa shook her head, in disagreement with Marcus’ order of protection and in disbelief, that Aerolus hadn’t lost it yet. Despite freeing one brother and working to save another, he too was ankle deep in the *Nocumat*, a creature that seemed more ominous the larger

it grew. Though its many hands clutched at the Storm brothers, its body seemed curiously content to stand there, as if watching the spectacle.

“Damn it, Tessa,” Marcus swore. “Use what I’m giving you, *affai*.” His voice grew alarming weak and the giant red body looming over him cocked its head. “Work with me, and I’ll be happy knowing we’ll have saved those I love most in the world: Tanselm, my family and you.”

What he really meant was “I’ll *die* happy” not “I’ll *be* happy.” The arrogant, overbearing jerk she loved was actually planning to die to save her. She stared at him, knowing she had precious little time to act. “You want to be a hero.” She sneered, taking comfort in her anger. *How like a prince to make all her decisions for her.* “Fine, be a hero. But you’re not dying until I’m good and ready to let you.”

Finally accepting the great power he’d given her, she consciously sapped more from those in the room, including ‘Sin Garu. Releasing the hold over her control, she let the rage of repressed vengeance, the bitter need for justice to swell within her. What ‘Sin Garu had done to her the past few hours, what he’d done to Marcus’ people, to his lands and his father stirred a mighty wave of fury that wouldn’t be stopped.

She channelled the Storm brothers’ pain and ‘Sin Garu’s sick pleasure into an unadulterated mass of chaotic energy. The taste of purity, of Tanselm’s essence filled her and her world turned hazy blue.

Dimly aware of Aerolus and Cadmus battling to save Marcus, she turned to ‘Sin Garu, now standing over a prone Jonas, and smiled. “You’ve taught me so much in so little time. Now it’s up to me to return the favour.”

The next few minutes blurred for Tessa. Crackling, booming thunder and static filled the air in and around her, as if she stood in the heart of a massive storm. Water and wind crashed over ‘Sin Garu like an extraordinarily well-contained monsoon.

The sorcerer shrieked and cursed, his words whipped away by the winds pulling at his hair and clothes. Psychic energy thrummed, pushing against the narrow walls of Davis’ apartment until the drywall actually buckled. Wood splintered and sparks flew as electrical wiring snapped and sparked, sizzling with the threat of shock under the cascading waters that splashed over everything.

Yet Tessa could only ride the wave of power, completely oblivious to the hazards of Marcus’ gift.

‘Sin Garu snarled and pointed a finger at her. She couldn’t make out what he said, but the spell was enough to shock her waters to stillness.

Breaking her concentration, the sorcerer shook himself and suddenly stood tall and completely dry, his expression one of mild

displeasure. "I'm sorry we couldn't see eye to eye on this. We would have made an unbeatable team," he said and sighed.

Jonas groaned but the sorcerer paid no attention. Tessa, however, saw him trying to tell her something. He motioned to the sorcerer time and time again, until Tessa understood what he wanted.

'Sin Garu pulled a large red glowing saber out of thin air and pointed it at her.

"Get back, Tessa," Cadmus yelled from behind her. But he was too late.

Using the last bit of energy she had left, she shifted Jonas close enough to grasp 'Sin Garu's leg.

The sorcerer froze and stared down at Jonas, his mouth open in shock.

"I think you and I have taken enough of their time, don't you, Van Nostren?" Jonas rasped. The black flames surrounding him engulfed the sorcerer's leg, slowly travelling up his body.

"Release me," 'Sin Garu ordered coldly. "Or die very, very slowly. I'll bend the light around you, I'll immolate you in the fires of the Next," he threatened before black flame danced from every orifice of his face.

"I'm glad I got to know you, Tessa," Jonas said shakily. "And I thank you for weakening him enough that I can do this last thing. Take care of the River Prince." He started to fade, his flames growing darker and darker until both he and 'Sin Garu disappeared into a black void in the middle of the room.

"Wait, Jonas," she said before a shout behind her drew her attention.

Marcus lay completely submerged in the *Nocumat* save for his face. His eyes were wide, his mouth open as he gasped for breath. Then the whites of his eyes started to darken, crimson slowly streaking the orbs as death reached for him in the guise of the *Nocumat's* giant red body.

Tessa ignored the loud explosion behind her and would have run to Marcus had she been able, but at that moment her strength finally gave out and she collapsed to the floor.

"Marcus," she cried weakly, reaching out her hand. She had nothing left to save him, no power within her but love to bring him back.

When her vision dimmed and finally blocked all sensation, she welcomed the darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

"It's too late, Aerolus," Cadmus said in a thick voice. "He's almost gone."

"It's never too late," Aerolus snapped, his control frayed so badly he feared he'd never get it back. Losing his father had been traumatic enough, but losing Marcus would be like losing a part of himself.

He should never have brought the three of them and Tessa to match 'Sin Garu. But in his arrogance he'd wrongly compared himself to Arim, believing in his strange dreams when he knew he was a fledgeling sorcerer. Instead of conferring with Arim on the matter, he'd blithely accepted his powers as infallible. And now his brother lay on death's path, the *Nocumat* bending low to take him in its arms for one final kiss before the Next.

"Dammit, Aerolus," Cadmus yelled, trying to destroy the red giant hovering over Marcus. "Do something!"

The shock waves and pounds of earth Cadmus shot at the *Nocumat* had no effect. Its red substance absorbed every slap of force and deflected the soil to the ground around it.

"Nothing's working," Aerolus said, tired and sick and despairing, wishing he could trade his life for his brother's. Tessa lay sprawled on the ground a few feet away, and her heartfelt plea for Marcus before passing out had shaken him to the quick.

He felt his brother's life sputtering and gathered the most dangerous spell he knew within him. Praying it would save Marcus, he knew he, however, would not survive its aftereffects. Then a flash of white light blinded him.

"Enough already, Oxcen," a feminine voice spoke, a voice both familiar and strangely alluring.

Aerolus couldn't understand how, but he heard the *Nocumat* answer. It used neither words nor thought, yet still it spoke to the woman. He watched in stunned disbelief as she appeared next to Tessa, a vision garbed in white and shining like the sparkle of sun off clear glass.

She looked at Aerolus. "All you had to do was call him by name." Stepping neatly over Tessa, she walked through the pooling *Nocumat* before he could warn her away.

Amazingly, the *Nocumat*, Oxcen apparently, protested her presence like a sullen little boy but did nothing to harm her. Aerolus could almost see it shuffling its globby feet petulantly as it voiced strenuous objections to returning home.

"I don't care. You shouldn't have encouraged the fair one to call on you. And wait until I tell your mother what you've done. She hates

the Dark Lords.”

The *Nocumat* quickly lost shape, its man form dripping into the puddle from which it had grown, and soon withdrew altogether from the floor, rolling back into itself until only a drop remained before it, too, disappeared.

Marcus dropped like a stone the last few inches to the floor, no longer held by the viscous Oxcen. Cadmus did nothing to catch his brother. Instead he stood frozen over him, as if unable to see or hear anything.

“He can’t hear us or move,” the woman in white said. Her face and form were ethereal, stunning and regal in bearing, reminding him a bit of his mother. She circled him, staring at him from head to foot, until his shock grew to annoyance.

“I don’t know who you are but—”

Her ageless features brightened, their fierce perfection slowly morphing into a younger woman, one of flesh and blood with softer features, and one who made his blood roar as the bright glow around her faded.

“Yes, you do.” She circled to his front again, a broad smile on her full, red lips. “And I’m tired of waiting, Aerolus. But I admit the view’s been nothing but pleasant.”

Her gaze ran slowly over his face to his chest and lower, lingering over his groin.

To his dismay, he felt direct, intense sexual need that lanced something inside of him he’d held distant for so long.

“Finally,” she said, her mouth curled into a knowing grin.

He flushed, his erection evident and entirely inappropriate considering what he’d been through tonight.

“I appreciate what you’ve done with the *Nocumat*,” he said, though he didn’t understand it, “but my brother is—”

“Waking up from a bad dream.” She shuddered, and he felt like a sex-starved fool for noticing the full shape of her breasts as they pushed against her fine white robe. “I’d have nightmares too if Oxcen wrapped his greedy little hands around my neck. That boy needs a firmer hand.”

“Boy?” He stared at her incredulously. “Dream?” His gaze flew to Marcus, expecting to see the worst, and he caught his breath when Marcus groaned and rolled his head on the floor.

“Tessa?” he murmured and reached out a hand. “I had the worst dream...”

“Oh, and don’t worry about Tessa. She’s sleeping it off, I expect. Quite a woman,” she said brightly, a gleam of approval shining in her violet eyes.

“Who...what are you?” Aerolus stared, conscious of the

tremendous power radiating from her slight yet womanly frame.

"Tsk, tsk, Aerolus. *What*, indeed? How rude. Whatever would Ravyn think?"

He stared, growing more and more aroused, and just as uneasy, as she neared. "What do you know of my mother?" he asked coolly.

She grinned, a dazzling expression that confused the hell out of him. Emotions and sensations coursed through his blood, and the normally unflappable Storm Lord had the overwhelming urge to throw her over his shoulder and show her how *rude* he wanted to be.

"Aerolus, I know everything about you." She sighed. "I have to go. It won't be long before Oxcen lets slip the queen has been here. And since she's in council, they'll know something's wrong.

"I'll be around, but if you really want to find me, look for me the next time you cross planes. And whatever you do," she paused as her face turned serious, "don't tell Arim or the others about me. They won't understand, and you and I aren't nearly ready to convince the Aellei to leave the Storm Lords alone. It's bad enough one Dark Lord has them rethinking their position on interfering. But then, maybe it's not just one."

"What?" *The 'All-ay'? Dark Lords?*

Her face screwed in irritation. "You know, this would be a lot easier if I had help. I changed my mind. Stop playing around and find me, mage. I'm getting tired of watching and sleeping alone."

Aerolus blinked but before he could demand answers, she flared to a brilliant white again and vanished.

As if time had not just stood still, Cadmus swore in disbelief. "What the hell happened? Two seconds ago he was covered in *Nocumat* shit, and now he's asking for Tessa?"

Marcus opened his eyes, confused. "Why the hell are you leaning over me? Where's Tessa? And why am I on the floor?" He sat up slowly with Cadmus' help. "I feel like I've been beaten with a stick." He stared suspiciously at Cadmus, then frowned. "You look terrible."

Aerolus saw the perplexed look on Cadmus' face and started laughing. Both his brothers stared at him in astonishment, but he couldn't stop. Marcus, who should be dead, wasn't. Cadmus, one moment a Storm Lord and the next a Djinn, was complaining already. And Tessa, lovely, powerful Tessa, slept like a baby while their enemy had vanished into the Next, or hopefully Hell, at the hands of a rebellious Djinn.

"Aerolus?" Cadmus asked hesitantly, his eyes haunted but sincere with concern. "You okay?"

"Fine," Aerolus said honestly. He felt alive, deliriously happy and surrounded by brotherly affection. Within him resonated Darius' satisfaction that all was well, and he turned to Cadmus with a smile.

“Let’s go home.”

Tessa murmured for Marcus and smiled when she felt him running strong hands up her thighs. Succumbing to her superb lover, she spread her legs wide and sighed with pleasure when his hands found her.

One finger penetrated while another rubbed her hardening clit. She writhed as her body pooled with want. A warm mouth covered one aroused breast, and when he nipped lightly, she arched up with a moan, completely at his mercy.

“Yes, *sertia*, more,” he rasped and added another finger, widening her passage. His fingers slid in and out easily, coated with her slick need that continued to grow as he played.

With amazing skill, he coaxed her to a quick orgasm. Unable to stop, she shuddered and came, tightening around his fingers as she rode his hand.

“That’s it, *sertia*.” He withdrew from her body and began kissing his way up her belly.

She could feel his cock hot and hard against her leg, and just the thought of him wanting her sparked her desire.

Marcus, however, would not be rushed. He kissed her gently, touching and stroking until he’d built her need once more. And he refused to let her touch him.

“If you touch me now, I’ll lose it,” he warned in a thick voice. “I want this to last. I want to watch you come around me when I spill inside you. I need to see your eyes when we’re one.” His blue eyes deepened to black.

“I love you, Marcus,” she whispered and circled his neck to bring his mouth to hers.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue seeking and sliding along the recesses of erotic zones she hadn’t thought existed in her mouth. But each swipe of his tongue against the roof of her mouth made her breath hitch, and when he thrust his tongue against hers, her sex quivered, wanting his shaft deep inside.

She arched into him, pressing her breasts against his chest and scraping the hardened peaks in slow circles.

“Tessa,” he groaned, reaching between them to position his cock on her clit. He rotated the head of his shaft, applying pressure to her sensitive area, sliding closer but never close enough to allow penetration.

He was killing her.

Not wanting another orgasm without him, she took charge. She battled and assumed control of the kiss, pulling and pushing at his tongue until he was panting and thrusting against her clit in time with

her mouth's rhythm.

"More, Marcus," she commanded, spreading her thighs further and wrapping her legs around his waist.

Her wet heat coated his shaft and snapped an invisible thread on his control. Her skilled and considerate prince suddenly vanished, replaced by the frenzied lover she desired so very much.

"Fuck," he snarled and thrust inside her in one long, deep stroke. "I tried so hard to be patient," he said as he continued to pummel her without mercy. "But you won't let me. You won't let me protect you," he said, and she couldn't stop the rush of euphoria gathering in her womb.

"You won't let me care for my *affai* as I should," he gritted and thrust harder, making her cry out as she came.

He continued to drive, working her as she throbbed and spasmed around him, her mind drugged with rapture so intense her vision dimmed. Then suddenly he tensed and pressed deeper, and she could feel him shuddering as he spilled inside her.

"Ah, Tessa," he groaned and pulled out, only to sink deeper once more as her body milked him. He kissed her deeply, his energy binding, seeking hers naturally, just as she accepted him without reservation. "I can't believe this is real."

She sighed and nuzzled the underside of his stubbled chin. So *sexy, and so mine*. "I can't either." She tensed as memories invaded, dark, fearful visions of a life without him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, running his hands along her sides to calm her.

"You almost died," she said softly, her temper growing as she recalled how willing he'd been to die for her. "You were willing to kill yourself for me. And I have a problem with that," she snapped, pushing him off her.

Rolling to the side, she sat up, heaving with anger. When his gaze settled lazily on her breasts, she fumed and grabbed a shirt from the nightstand. Obviously his, the way it draped over her. The T-shirt made her warm and fuzzy, and she had to fight to hold onto her mad.

"I'm a little hazy on the details," Marcus said as he laid back on his pillow and placed his hands behind his neck. "I'm remembering bits and pieces, but not the whole. The last thing I remember is you standing up behind the couch, walking right through our protection spell that should have been impenetrable." He kept his voice light and she couldn't tell if he was angry or merely rehashing the incident.

"Don't even try blaming me for any of it," she said defensively. "I spent hours alone with that monster and woke up from Jonas' mind zap with a raging headache. But I survived. I'm no delicate *princess*," she used the word deliberately and scored a hit when he frowned,

“who needs pampering and protection.” She thought about that. “Okay, so maybe I could have used a little protection.”

“We haven’t been using any, you know.” He grinned, throwing her off. “Protection, I mean.” He laughed at the small ‘o’ she made.

“I, we, I mean, you—” she stammered, feeling like an idiot, but her hands crossed her abdomen in an instinctively hopeful gesture. “That’s not the point!”

“What is the point, *affai*?” he asked lazily, staring at her chest until she could feel her nipples grazing the cotton fabric, arousing her once more.

“The point, River Prince, is that you were going to die. For me.”

He shrugged. “And for Tanselm and my brothers.”

“So what, I’m chopped liver?” Fury washed through her, that he could be so casual about this. Her eyes filled and she grew even angrier. Dammit. He’d made her cry, and she never cried.

“Oh, Tessa.” He immediately sat up and cradled her stiff body in his arms. “I’m sorry, *sertia*. I’m just so happy to have you safe and sound, I can’t worry any more about what happened. I love you so much.”

He kissed her, a meeting of hearts that kicked their desire into high gear again. Marcus groaned and shifted her so that she sat astride his erection with the sheet between them.

“Marcus,” she protested, needing to air her concerns. Though when he rotated his hips like that...

Marcus sighed. She was right. His cock could wait, her answers couldn’t.

“Tessa, when I couldn’t find you after work I went a little crazy. I’ve been afraid I wouldn’t have what it takes to defend what I prize most. But I did.” He felt a moment’s pride that he had, in fact, passed his own test. “It’s my job to protect you. Wait, I’m trying to explain something difficult for me to say.” He could hear the stiffness in his voice but couldn’t help it. “I make mistakes. I’m not perfect.”

She stared at him, amazed, and broke into laughter.

“It’s not funny,” he said coolly, not amused when she laughed harder.

“Hell, Marcus. I could have told you that from day one. You’re bossy, conceited, too free with your affections, but that’s stopped now, so I’ll let that one go.”

He waited for her to finish, and when she continued his vast litany of faults, he sighed in defeat. “Okay, okay. That may have come out wrong.”

“No, it didn’t. You don’t have to be perfect all the time, Marcus. Your father told me all about you months ago. I thought it was all a

dream at the time, a Freudian joke for having spent so much time at work both fantasising and disliking you. But now that I think about it, with everything that happened, it might not have been a dream after all.”

“You saw my father?” He swallowed around a dry mouth.

She nodded. “His name is Faustus, and you have the same shaped face, the same chin. He’s very proud of you by the way.”

“I know,” Marcus said, his voice thready. “I used to think I’d never be good enough to be king, to be even a fraction as good as my father. But I know better now.” He hugged her tight, pleased when she squirmed against his still-hard cock. “You make me whole, Tessa. With you I can be me, just Marcus. And I don’t have to pretend.”

“Oh Marcus, you’re not as good an actor as you think. At first I used to think you were an arrogant jerk because you believed yourself better than everyone. But as we grew closer, I could see you used that ‘kingly’ tone as a front. Don’t you know I love you *because* of your many flaws?” she teased.

“I wouldn’t say many.” He felt somewhat defensive. “Maybe one or two, perhaps.”

She shifted the blanket away from his hips and sank down over his rock-hard shaft. He groaned, his mind emptying of everything but the feel and scent of Tessa.

“You talk too much,” she said and lifted up, only to sink heavily over him again. “If it weren’t for my brother’s advice to go with you to Tanselm and be deliriously happy for the rest of my life, I’d leave you in a minute,” she gasped.

“Three faults, but that’s my final offer,” he murmured and swallowed her laughter.

She rode him hard, all teasing aside when he found her nipples and toyed her into submission. Watching her take him, he couldn’t help thinking her perfect for him, and thanked the Light for sending him to this place.

With or without Tanselm, Marcus’ life finally felt complete.

Chapter Sixteen

"You do know this isn't over yet," Aerolus said as they waited for Arim.

"Obviously," Marcus answered. "If it were, we'd all be going home. But I'm sure Arim will explain when he gets here."

It was a sure sign how much Tessa meant to Marcus that the River Prince didn't mind waiting for explanations. Aerolus couldn't help the joy that filled him, despite his nagging certainty that the woman in white would bring more trouble than he wanted to handle just now. But she was a matter that could wait.

Both Darius and Marcus had found their *affai*, women to love and cherish, to bless them with children. Already the burden of gratifying the prophesied Tetrarch was half fulfilled. If something were to happen to him, at least Darius and Marcus stood a chance to reinstate the Storm Lord line.

He shook his head. Brooding about his possible death was pointless, so he returned his attention to his brothers. The mood in their living room was decidedly warm with Marcus set to return home today. However, a glance at Cadmus disturbed him. His brown-eyed brother had been worrying him for weeks.

"I've got to be at work early tonight." Cadmus' mouth tightened briefly before relaxing into a lazy smile. "Ellie has *issues* Gerry thinks he needs to address."

"Issues?" Tessa asked curiously.

Since the fight in Davis' apartment two weeks ago, Cadmus had been surprisingly upbeat. Granted, they had defeated 'Sin Garu, but even Marcus agreed his brother was acting outside the norm.

Cadmus shrugged. "Issues with me. I don't know. Half the time the woman's a pain in the ass, the other half she's not there. Who am I to complain?" He grinned and elbowed Aerolus, changing the subject. "Didn't I tell you Marcus would be the next to fall? I knew he had the hots for her."

"Cadmus, we both know you had no clue who Tessa really was," Marcus said, his tone condescending. "It was only my decision to lower my standards after so many months at Tomanna that made her acceptable as an *affai*."

Sudden silence met his declaration, and all eyes turned to Tessa. Marcus', Aerolus noted, shone with laughter.

"I just love when that stick appears up his ass." Tessa grinned and Cadmus laughed, a sincere chuckle that made Aerolus happy to hear. "Lowering standards, that's a good one."

"But you know it's not true." Marcus squeezed her tight and

kissed the breath out of her. He whispered loudly in her ear, "Around you, *sertia*, nothing on me is lowered."

Tessa flushed.

"Just what I love to see, a royal prince desperately in love with his *affai*." Arim walked towards them, appearing from out of nowhere. "So you're finally ready to go home, then?"

Marcus nodded. "Might as well. Then Tessa can find some acceptable clothes to wear." He eyed her frayed jeans and blouse with disdain.

"You're such a snot. Remember, Marcus, I'm about to become a queen. Show a little respect."

Arim smiled and gestured them to the dark circle growing on the far wall of the living room. "Your future awaits." Then he turned and stared at Cadmus, a frown on his face.

Marcus lingered while Tessa hugged Aerolus and lastly, Cadmus. Before stepping away, she whispered something in Cadmus' ear that had him pulling back.

"Just think about it," she said. At Marcus' puzzled look, she shook her head. "I'll tell you later."

He shrugged and turned to his brothers. He grabbed Cadmus first, crushing him in a mighty hug his brother fully returned.

"Don't give Aerolus a hard time," he warned, a smile on his lips. "And tell him whatever's bothering you."

"Why should I?" Cadmus asked flippantly, all the while Aerolus remained aware Arim's intent gaze hadn't wavered from his brother. "You never did."

"Yes, but that's because I'm a conceited asshole, remember?" Marcus smirked and shoved Cadmus aside, considering Aerolus before he spoke. "I'll miss you too, brother. Have you need of us, just ask."

Us, he said. *Marcus and Tessa*. Aerolus lip curled in a smile, one that reflected in his gaze. "Would that I meet someone as well-matched for me as Tessa is for you. You've the luck of the Light, Marcus. Go on home, and tell Darius and Samantha we miss them. And Tessa," he said, staring solemnly at his brother's *affai* with a twinkle in his eyes, "keep him straight, will you?"

She grinned and nodded, eager to start her new life. Taking Marcus' arm, she and her prince walked through the portal, turning one last time to say good-bye.

"Darius and your mother are waiting for you on the other end, Marcus. I'll be along," Arim said, and with a wave of his hand, gestured good-bye to Marcus and Tessa while closing the portal behind them.

Just great, he meant to stay a while. Aerolus mused the potential problems this visit would surely pose.

“Now that the happy pair has left, which one of you wants to share what the hell’s been going on since my last visit?” Arim narrowed his gaze. “What aren’t you telling me?” He stared at the two of them, no longer the affable spellcaster, but a furious mage on the verge of losing his patience.

Cadmus stared wide-eyed at Arim before turning to consider Aerolus with a sharp gaze. He whistled. “Holding out on me, too, eh, bro?”

Aerolus forced himself to remain calm, holding in place the shield that sheltered him from Arim’s prying mind. He turned back to Cadmus, sorry to put his brother on the hot seat, but grateful for the excuse to find out what bothered him. “I’m not sure what Arim’s referring to, but I think we both know you turning Djinn during the battle with ‘Sin Garu was no freak accident.”

Arim froze. “Turning Djinn?” He grabbed Cadmus by the shoulder and spun him to stare directly into his eyes. Then began the long inquisition Aerolus had hoped for, giving him more time to shelve *his* problems.

A bright light winked at the corner of his eye, and grateful for even the smallest of distractions, Aerolus turned in its direction. Paying it more attention than it probably deserved, Aerolus subtly studied it, using a small spell to enhance his vision, when his breath caught.

His lady in white was the size of a dime, complete with sheer wings, a warm glow, and an irritated scowl darkening her violet eyes.

Queen in council. The Aellei. Dark Lords. Suddenly it all came together, as his intense studies in the Great Hall bore fruit.

Her iridescent white skin. That otherworldly glow. Wings. She commanded the Shadren as evidenced by her familiarity with the *Nocumat*. And her reference to the Aellei. How had he forgotten mention of *them*?

Aelle—a land more notorious than Tanselm, one steeped in raw, shadowy magic. With a legendary reputation for amusing themselves through deception and a conceit that made Marcus look tame, the Aellei made poor allies and even poorer enemies. And they had, if memory served correctly, been briefly associated with the Dark Lords during Tanselm’s dark years, before the Storm Lords liberated the land.

His heart wanted to pound out of his chest. With a knowledge he wished, *by the Light how he wished*, he did not possess, he knew the woman in white was an Aellei, his *affai*, and trouble with a capital ‘T’.